



AP Photo

The Boardman coal plant, which closed last week, was the last coal-fired power generating plant in Oregon.

# Coal-free future: Parts of Oregon still rely heavily on coal power

Continued from Page A2

the electrical grid to keep the lights on when consumer demand exceeds the ability of generation.

These “demand response programs” rely on greater interaction with consumers to build a more intricate electrical system.

For example, many appliances, such as water heaters, can act as a sort of battery.

“Down in my basement I have a 50-gallon tank of hot water,” said Corson. “That is actually a kind of battery because most of the time during the day I don’t need 50 gallons of hot water, but my hot water heater is down there keeping that 50 gallons topped off all the time anyway.”

Demand response programs would put a control on water heaters and if demand for power outstrips the generating capacity or if power gets exceptionally expensive, utilities could send a signal out to hundreds of thousands of water heaters throughout their service territory that switch them off for five minutes.

“For any one water heater, that’s not going to produce a noticeable difference for the people in that home or business,” Corson said. “They’re still going to have hot water, that 50-gal-

**ACCORDING TO 2018 NUMBERS, THE MOST RECENT AVAILABLE, OREGON’S RESOURCE MIX, WHICH CONSISTS OF IN-STATE AND OUT-OF-STATE GENERATION, IS MADE UP OF JUST UNDER 25% COAL. MUCH OF THIS COMES FROM COLSTRIP — A COAL PLANT LOCATED IN MONTANA — THAT IS PARTLY OWNED BY PGE AND PACIFICORP.**

lon tank is still full. But, add up the electricity required for that 100,000 water heaters over five minutes and it’s a significant chunk of electricity.”

This system could enable utilities to dramatically reduce carbon emissions. PGE is aiming to reduce emissions by more than 80% by 2050, said Corson.

“It’s a big change,” he said.

In Oregon, where the natural environment is flush with renewable energy possibilities, demand response programs can be used to bolster the system. But they can also be used in other states with less natural renewable energy resources or policies.

“It’s good business for the utility. It helps them from having to go out on the spot market and buy electricity when it’s really, really expensive or having to build more resources than they need,” Smith said. “It just makes sense to do from a cost perspective.”

“It’s not a question of

whether or not we can do it at this point, it’s just which is the best way that’s going to be most affordable,” Smith said.

### Buying out of state nonrenewables

Some regions of Oregon still rely heavily on coal power. According to 2018 numbers, the most recent available, Oregon’s resource mix, which consists of in-state and out-of-state generation, is made up of just under 25% coal. Much of this comes from Colstrip — a coal plant located in Montana — that is partly owned by PGE and PacifiCorp.

“In the case of Bend, an area where people have a fairly high amount of environmental proclivities, over half their energy still comes from coal,” said Brian Skeahan, director of the Community Renewable Energy Association.

However, Oregon’s 2016 plan that ended coal generation in the state also pro-

hibits purchasing coal-produced electricity from out of state sources after 2035. PGE and PacifiCorp will not be able to charge Oregonians for power produced by Colstrip after 2035. But, they can still buy other non-renewable energy, such as natural gas, from other states.

One possible move the utilities can make is to fill

the gap by buying energy from other states that have less restrictive energy generation regulations in place. This purchased power could come from nonrenewable energy sources, could require long-term contracts and be more expensive as utilities would be buying energy off the open market.

PGE affirmed that it would not replace nonre-

newable energy with more nonrenewables from out of state, instead committing to seek nonemitting resources.

According to Robertson, California is generating so much solar that it’s starting to cost them money. And, since the western half of North America functions under one electricity grid, extra power that is generated needs to be used. This benefits Oregon utilities as they can buy very cheap electricity from California in the summer.

Nick Rosenberger is a reporter with the Catalyst Journalism Project at the University of Oregon’s School of Journalism and Communication.

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