



Keeping California's Clean Energy Promise

California is the fifth largest economy in the world, and a major economic and environmental influence on the Pacific Rim. California is also the tenth largest energy consumer in the world. Clean energy and energy efficiency are politically popular ideas in California. Over 70 percent of Californians support investment in renewable energy, and say they are willing to pay extra for it.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is promising to accelerate our renewable development to a 20 percent mix by the year 2010. With the signing of the California Global Warming Solutions Act, he is promising big reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. On the surface, it seems as if lawmakers in California fully support a future of clean, green energy.

But scratch the surface of the political promises, and something else emerges. Running counter to these efforts is California's push to import Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) into the state.

LNG is natural gas that is extracted overseas in locations like Russia's Sakhalin Island and the Peruvian Amazon, chilled to -260 degrees Fahrenheit, and shipped to coastal terminals proposed for California, Mexico, or Oregon in huge tankers. Then it would be re-gasified, and used largely to fuel gas-fired power plants for electricity generation. There currently are no LNG terminals on the West Coast of North or South America.

LNG has been promoted by the energy industry as an environmentally benign fuel. But in reality, its extraction endangers ecosystems and communities abroad. It also endangers coastal communities that host LNG import terminals. The import terminals and tankers that store the fuel are highly flammable, prone to accidents, and are known terrorist targets. An LNG facility that ignited in Algeria in early 2004 killed over 27 people, and shattered windows up to 5 miles away.

In addition, an influx of LNG into California would create a dependence on a foreign fuel source that is a potent greenhouse gas. Such an influx would undermine renewable energy, efficiency and conservation initiatives. Furthermore, the entire life cycle emissions of LNG would emit tens of millions of tons of greenhouse gases per year.

The California Public Utilities Commission and other government agencies had been listening largely to armies of industry lobbyists and lawyers who have been selling them on this 21st century version of snake oil. Using fear tactics about declining domestic supplies of natural gas, they have been raising the specter of the rolling blackouts from 2000 and 2001. These agencies were ready to rubber stamp the LNG import scheme.

That is, until Pacific Environment and over 20 other grassroots organizations found out about this scheme, formed the coalition Ratepayers for Affordable Clean Energy (RACE), and began to take action. We are bringing into the debate the harmful impacts of LNG, from the upstream impacts abroad, to the impacts and dangers on California's coastal communities. We have questioned the need for LNG, demanding that the state stop listening to lobbyists, and start listening to citizens, scientists and energy experts without a vested interest in fossil fuels. And RACE has played a key role in supporting local efforts to stop LNG terminals halting projects in Oxnard, Vallejo, and other West Coast communities.

California: A Clean Energy Model?

Without a doubt, California's dynamic economy needs reliable energy sources. For that reason, RACE supports the California Energy Action Plan, which proposes a "loading order" of strategies to meet future demand.

In order of priority, these are: (1) Energy efficiency and conservation; (2) Accelerated development of renewable energy; and (3) Evaluation of the need for new fossil fuels.

The first two items have not been fully implemented, yet the state is leap-frogging ahead, and rushing to import LNG without a solid implementation plan for steps one and two. However, if they follow their own plan, we can meet our future energy supply. Here's how:

Efficiency:

There are many steps that individuals can take to save energy, such as buying energy-saving lightbulbs and weather-stripping. But some things are out of our control and require political action. For instance, several of California's gas-fired power plants are decades old, and are hemorrhaging gas on a large scale. If these older plants were replaced with state-of-the-art technologies, they would save huge amounts of natural gas.

Renewable Energy:

California's Renewable Portfolio Standard law, signed by Governor Gray Davis in 2000, requires the state to have a 20 percent renewable mix by 2020. Governor Schwarzenegger promises to accelerate this goal to 2010, a goal underscored in the state's Energy Action Plan. The power generated by wind, solar, geothermal and other renewable sources can also drastically reduce our natural gas demand.

Both of these strategies will stimulate the economy, and together they will reduce more natural gas than the volume that would be imported by two LNG terminals. They will support business development and the type of new technologies and innovation that California is famous for. They will create manufacturing jobs. According to conservative estimates, a home-grown renewable industry will create 7 times the number of jobs per kilowatt hour than the natural gas industry.

These strategies will make California a global clean energy leader, which other states and countries will want to emulate. By investing in clean energy, we can support the economy, protect the environment, stabilize the climate, and all breathe a little easier!

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