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California's new Public Utilities Commission president must lead us to a gas-free future



Equipment and machinery is seen on a ridge above a natural gas well known as SS25 in Southern California Gas Company's vast Aliso Canyon facility. Photo by Scott L via Creative Commons.



By Gladys Limón and V. John White, Special to CalMatters

Everywhere you turn in California, clean energy technologies are winning out over gas.

From Oxnard to Los Angeles and Glendale, to the Inland Empire and Bay Area, proposed and existing gas-fired plants are being scrapped in favor of cleaner options.

Clean energy is winning because it's a safer and more affordable option.

This is critical for the communities who have been forced to live with gas plants in their backyard—often low-income communities of color who have disproportionately shouldered the pollution burdens of our state’s dependence on fossil fuels. For them, the shift to cleaner energy sources comes not a moment too soon.

As solar and wind costs plunge, energy storage technology such as batteries and large scale, pumped water, compressed air, and thermal energy storage are proving they can cost-effectively reduce our reliance on gas to meet local capacity and reliability needs.

Battery storage projects are now slated to replace gas-fired plants in Moorpark, Oakland and San Jose, to provide reliable energy when the sun is down and the wind isn’t blowing.

But getting to 100% clean and affordable energy is about more than closing gas plants.

It’s about enabling an entire suite of clean resources, from distributed generation, to local solar power that recharges energy storage systems, to demand response, time-of-use rates, and targeted energy efficiency to work together to balance the energy grid.

This is the hard work facing Marybel Batjer, Gov. Gavin Newsom’s newly appointed president of the California Public Utilities Commission.

Bringing these zero-emission resources on to the grid requires innovation, new ways of thinking and a strong dose of political will.

The Public Utilities Commission has shown a commitment to prioritizing communities bearing the highest pollution and socioeconomic burdens in the state.

In the California Environmental Justice Alliance’s [annual agency scorecard](#) assessing how California regulators have honored the principles of environmental justice in 2018, the Public Utilities Commission scored a B+.

Now, we must ensure that these communities gain access to the clean energy technologies they have been promised.

This is where we need visionary leadership from Batjer, because when we scratch beneath the surface, we find the Public Utilities Commission is in danger of moving in the opposite direction.

The commission must redesign its processes to allow clean energy technology to compete with gas, by being bundled together and strategically dispatched, so that they can provide the same services under the same contract terms as gas plants.

They must reform and update accounting rules to enable cost effective, zero carbon resources to compete to provide grid reliability services. The technology is available and cost effective, but is left out because of outdated requirements.

Instead, the commission is preparing to award multi-year contracts to gas plants and is failing to prepare and expand California's portfolio of clean resources to meet our "resource adequacy" requirement.

Despite the direction of the Legislature to adopt a plan to acquire new large-scale storage projects, the Public Utilities Commission has stalled. Even more alarming, the commission is allowing Southern California Gas Company to pull more gas from the dangerous Aliso Canyon storage facility, instead of looking for strategies to honor Gov. Newsom's promise to close the facility that poisoned thousands of people.

This business-as-usual thinking is a luxury we simply do not have.

We're encouraged by Gov. Newsom's appointment of Marybel Batjer. By appointing a leader who is not afraid of blazing new trails, Gov. Newsom is exhibiting his own bold leadership. As Batjer takes the reins, we look forward to seeing her exercise her expertise to seize the incredible opportunity before her.

Under her watch, the agency must prepare California to move beyond gas. Achieving that goal will require much greater integration within the agency, and dedicated coordination with other agencies and power providers.

Creating an equitable, safe and secure phase-out of gas in coming decades will be no small feat. That transition must be undertaken with a commitment to protecting working families, improving energy affordability, and avoiding saddling Californians with increasingly expensive gas energy.

Ms. Batjer has demonstrated she is not afraid of taking courageous action and shaking things up. This is exactly what the Public Utilities Commission needs.

The Public Utilities Commission's power to help California's communities thrive is undeniable. With Batjer exhibiting people-centered leadership that combines technical expertise and innovation, she can play a major role in leading California into a healthy and prosperous 100 percent clean energy future.

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