

OPINION

Regulators are undermining California's transition to 100% clean energy

Luis Amezcua and V. John White
April 3, 2021 | Updated: April 3, 2021 4 a.m.



The Diablo Canyon Power Plant near Avila Beach in San Luis Obispo County has two Westinghouse-designed pressurized-water nuclear reactors operated by Pacific Gas & Electric Co.
Nancy Pastor for The Chronicle 2015

Last summer, failures and heat exhaustion at gas power plants contributed to California's first non-wildfire-related blackout in 19 years. In the days following, when temperatures remained brutally high and California's power supply dangerously low, Southern California Edison and its customers united to move 4,000 megawatts of demand off the grid, preventing further blackouts.

The lesson? Demand response delivered solutions when gas generation failed.

With the California Public Utility Commission now rushing to prevent a similar disaster this summer, advocates are concerned regulators are not going far enough to invest in the clean energy resources and demand-side solutions that are key to supporting a reliable electricity grid. In a decision last week, regulators approved a plan that, while an improvement on earlier proposals, still opens the door to new gas contracts and increased reliance on diesel generators.

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These proposals are the latest in a pattern of failures that are undermining California's transition to clean energy, and as clean energy experts, we are alarmed. The CPUC continues to double down on gas, despite its contribution to climate change and toxic air quality, and despite legal mandates to ramp up renewable energy.

This is all the more concerning given that a new California Energy Commission analysis finds that California will need to move three times faster in building out solar and wind resources, and eight times faster in adding battery storage, to meet California's 100% clean energy target. Gov. Gavin Newsom must step in and get regulators back on track to address the following issues:

Regulators have had years to plan for the closure of the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, the wind-down of the last of the Korean War-era coastal gas power plants and the rapid closure of coal power plants in Western states that previously supplied imports to California; and to fill the looming power gap with clean energy. But despite the evidence that investing in renewables is the most cost-effective solution, there has been a distinct and inexplicable failure by the CPUC to do so.

Now time is running out. A recent analysis from the Union of Concerned Scientists finds that without urgent action, California's cumulative climate-warming emissions from the electricity sector will be 15.5 million metric tons higher over the next decade as a result of the closure of Diablo Canyon.

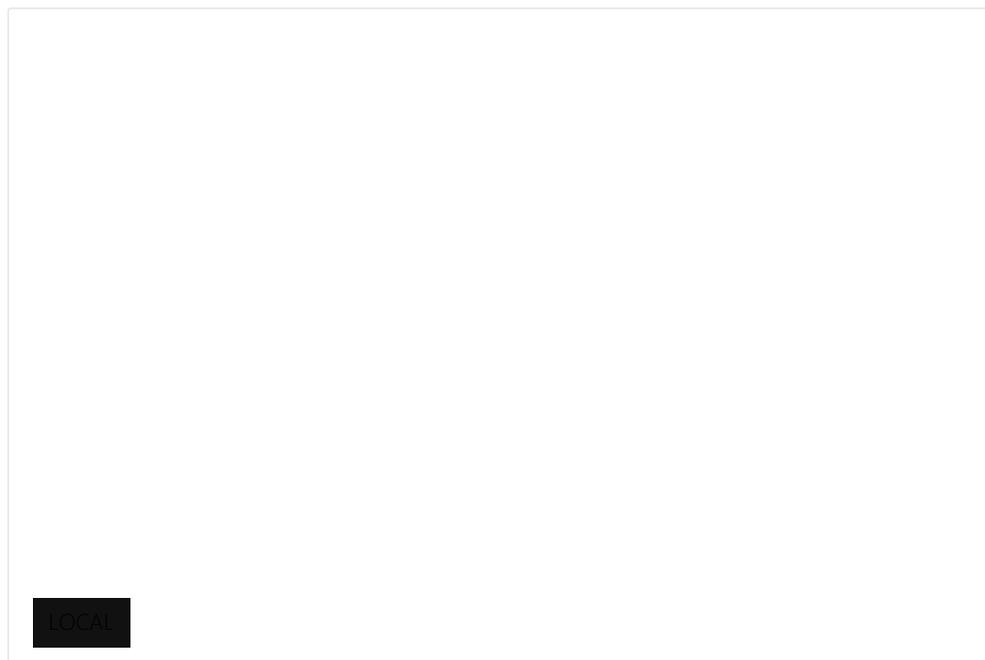
Filling this procurement gap with gas rather than renewable energy will also increase

nitrogen oxide pollution by an estimated 1,890 metric tons over the next decade. This pollution will burden communities of color and low-income communities where 78% of California's gas power plants reside — areas already disproportionately impacted by power shutoffs, COVID-19 and systemic inequities.

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At the same time, the CPUC has been plagued by a series of inexcusable bureaucratic delays in siting- and permitting-approved and financed transmission upgrades that are key to bringing renewable energy resources online. Without immediate intervention, this failure could shut out thousands of megawatts of renewable energy resources that could play a key role in meeting California's electricity needs without additional gas power.

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Last month, regulators additionally chose to maintain a power sector target that only reduces electricity sector emissions to 46 million metric tons by 2030 — a standard too weak to meet California's climate targets.

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Taken together, these decisions present a distinct threat to our state. The CPUC is foolish and reckless to expect polluting gas to solve a problem it created.

It doesn't have to be this way. While the CPUC is doubling down on gas, the publicly owned Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has provided a model for planning for the transition to clean energy. The utility has found that not only is 100% clean energy achievable, ratepayer costs can be lowered if we pursue a broader suite of solutions. The

Sacramento Metropolitan Utility District is engaged in a similar exercise.

Newsom has a responsibility to protect Californians from the health and climate consequences of the CPUC's regulatory failures — and we are counting on him to intervene and direct his agencies to uphold their responsibility to transition to 100% clean energy.

Luis Amezcua is a senior campaign representative for the Sierra Club's My Generation campaign, and V. John White is executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies. They wrote this piece for CalMatters, a public interest journalism venture committed to explaining how California's Capitol works and why it matters.

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