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The long view on energy

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Short-term thinking on energy is going to cause some long-term problems

Ask Paul Edmonds, vice president of National Semiconductor in South Portland. In August, he wrote in the Portland Press Herald, "An inefficient regulatory system and lack of long-term energy strategy are conspiring against Maine citizens and businesses."

I was intrigued. So I called him. He told me, "High electricity costs are a threat to manufacturing competitiveness in Maine."

His points should be well-taken. National Semiconductor employs are over 450 full and part-time workers at their plant in South Portland. So, is it time for Maine to wake up and re-think what its elected representatives and state government are doing?

Maine already pays on average 40 percent more than the national average for electricity. The policies being pursued by our legislators and the governor will only make that problem worse.

Current policies may provide short-term employment to heavy construction companies and a few permanent jobs, but they threaten sustainable, permanent, high-paying, high-tech jobs in Maine. For example: only one permanent job was created for every 38 construction jobs on the Kibby Mountain windfarm, according to numbers cited by the governor's office.

Edmonds makes a point of hiring graduates from the University of Maine's school of engineering, he told me in an interview. About 50 percent of the plant's employees have undergraduate degrees for better. The remainder are high school graduates that are hired and trained by the company.

These jobs are directly threatened by short-term, shortsighted energy policies.

Here's what I mean:

• Sources of electric power in Maine already exceed the statutory 30 percent renewable and efficient standard by 140 percent. An enviable 42 percent of power produced and supplied in

Maine comes from co-generation, biomass or hydro. We have enough power generating capacity.

• Maine has an excess of power supply. Maine can produce over 3,200 megawatts, but uses only 900 on an average day. The New England grid has 33,000 megawatts of capacity and uses, on average, about 16,000. According to a report issued by Goldman Sachs on October 11, New England has an electricity overcapacity of 15 percent to 20 percent until after 2020.

And New England already has the transmission lines and location to produce an additional 1,200 megawatts of power for only $500 million at Seabrook Station in New Hampshire, according to Lisa Linowes, an energy analyst from Windaction.org, who spoke at a recent public meeting in Rumford.

This power, she added, would last another thirty to fifty years. So why pay higher electricity costs for power we do not need, when we are already exceeding renewable standards and have more than enough capacity in the existing system?

• Central Maine Power is now owned by a Spanish utility, the conglomerate Iberdrola. CMP wants to add $1.4 billion of transmission line to accommodate wind farms.

But in an Oct. 19 column in the Portland Press Herald, William Downes, an energy financier from Cape Elizabeth, said, "Any and all costs incurred by a grid operator are passed onto consumers in higher electricity rates, and any monies provided by the government must be made up elsewhere in the form of higher taxes. So, either as a ratepayer or a taxpayer, all the costs of wind power will be paid out of everybody's pocket."

What will all this investment really cost us?

• Our fuel supplies do not come from overseas.

About 52 percent of Maine's electric power is fueled by clean natural gas, of which almost 100 percent comes from the Canadian Maritime Provinces and the United States. Eighty percent of our heating oil comes from Newfoundland. Wind power will not reduce our dependence on overseas energy sources - or our electric bill payments to Spain.

Edmonds, at National Semiconductor, advocates competitive measures like reducing permitting processes for all power supplies, cutting ties with ISO New England, and reconstituting a locally focused power company or companies like Kennebunk Light and Power.

If we again become independent and implement better policies, he argues, electricity charges could drop to less than eight cents per-kilowatt. This policies would lower our light bills and keep the money at home, where it is needed. Now that's sustainability.

Perhaps, if our elected representatives would listen to people like Edmonds, or Downes, or us, the people that pay the light bill, we would have better energy policies.

It makes you wonder why they aren't.

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