

Old thinking in a changing world

Dirty power plant is the wrong choice for Colorado, Earth

By J. Thomas McKinnon
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We are witnessing a high-stakes race in which the fate of the planet hangs in balance. In one lane is the astounding pace at which the discussion of global climate change has entered the marketplace of ideas.

Mainstream magazines, pro-business politicians and utility industry executives like Dick Kelley of Xcel are now saying they recognize that the world is warming and that rising concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere are part of the cause. Action has yet to catch up with rhetoric for some, but the overwhelming passage of the Boulder Climate Action Plan a few weeks ago shows that the public not only recognizes the problem, but is ready to act.

In the other lane is the devastating rate at which global climate change is showing its effects. Scientists are reporting that the glaciers in Greenland and Antarctica are melting much faster than they had predicted. Violent and unusual weather patterns are more common. Greenhouse gases — GHGs — are rising at ever-increasing rates, and many of the signatories of the Kyoto Protocol are having difficulty meeting their targets.

The stakes of this race are the well-being of every inhabitant of the planet. The "Stern Review," an analysis of the economic impact of climate change compiled by the former chief economist of the World Bank, predicts that global Gross Domestic Product will be reduced by 20 percent if no action is taken to reduce GHGs. And the burden of climate change will not fall evenly across the globe; the developing world will pay a disproportionately high price through flooded cities, droughts, etc., even though they had virtually nothing to do with creating the problem.

On the positive side, Nicholas Stern notes that we can address the problem with an investment of about 1 percent of global GDP. In the common vernacular, dealing with the problem should be a no-brainer.

Although it is not widely appreciated, the biggest contributors to GHGs in Colorado are coal-fired electricity stations. These monuments to 19th century technology spew out 48 percent of the CO₂ within our borders. Shockingly, we are still building new ones. At present, Xcel Energy is in the early stages of constructing the Comanche 3 power station in Pueblo. This behemoth will emit 6 million tons of CO₂ per year. The pollution from this plant will still be overhead haunting us for the next seven generations. It is difficult to put such large numbers in perspective, but look at it this way: the GHG emissions from Comanche 3 are equivalent to half the CO₂ emissions from all the passenger cars in the entire state.

The tragedy of Xcel's poorly thought-out decision to build Comanche 3 is that we have viable, non-polluting, cost-effective alternatives available to us right now. Xcel already has its very successful Windsource program that will soon be delivering almost 10 percent of the electricity used in Colorado due to Amendment 37. Wind, however, cannot displace the "base load" power of a coal-fired plant because of the intermittency of the resource.

A less-well-known technology, concentrating solar power — or CSP — can produce electricity whenever it is needed by the consumer. CSP plants use focusing mirrors to create steam from which the power is generated. These units include a means of storing thermal energy for use after the sun sets. Further, CSP can deliver power at competitive rates. Several California utilities have signed contracts for CSP power totaling many more megawatts than our dirty Comanche 3 will deliver.

Why are we stuck with old-school polluting power in Colorado? Part of the reason is that Colorado Public Utilities Commission creates incentives for the use of coal relative to cleaner technologies. An arcane rule known as the "Base Load Energy Benefit" tells Xcel that the more the company fouls our air with coal, the more its profits will increase. Do Coloradans know that their official state policies say that saving a few pennies on electricity is more important than the future of the planet?

When Xcel officials presented their so-called Least Cost Plan to the PUC to justify spending \$1.3 billion of ratepayer's money for Comanche 3, the board allowed them to use inaccurate coal-price projections. Unbiased analyses, such as the "Balanced Energy Plan" prepared by Boulder's Western Resource Advocates, shows that building coal plants is anything but least cost.

What can the citizens of Colorado do to protect our interests? First, remember that the monopolistic rights given to Xcel Energy to deliver our power were in exchange for the responsibility that the company acts in the public's best interest. We can contact Xcel Energy and tell its executives that we've had enough of their coal-age behavior, that the citizens of Colorado want to live in the 21st Century, not the 19th.

Xcel's CEO Richard Kelly was recently quoted as saying, "The time for action is now," with regard to climate change ("Utility supports clean energy," Nov. 11). Ask Mr. Kelly why his company thinks that empty rhetoric is more important than real action. Next, we can contact the PUC and remind the commissioners that the "P" in their name means that they represent the long-term interests of the public and not the short-term goals of Xcel executives. Request that the PUC reopen the hearings at which they granted Xcel the right to build Comanche 3 based on faulty information.

Finally, and most hopefully, we have a new leadership in the state that will have the ability to make real changes. Write Governor-Elect Bill Ritter and tell him two things: a) We've had enough with coal-fired electricity in Colorado, and b) we need reform of the PUC rules so they represent the true interests of the public. Also, sign up for Windsource so your own electricity consumption will not be contributing to the problem.

Working together, the citizens of Colorado can show our leaders that we have the political will to put our only planet on the right track.

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