

Montana Public Service Commission



Tony O'Donnell, Commissioner

Citing the probable lack of energy leading to “rolling blackouts” in eastern Montana this summer as well as frighteningly real possibilities of hugely inadequate shortages in Montana in winter, Public Service Commissioners, Tony O’Donnell, and Randy Pinocci are today calling upon state leaders to do all that may be necessary to retain Montana’s last major baseload power plant, the Colstrip generating facility.

Commissioners noted the alerts for anticipated energy shortages in the electricity delivery systems by the North American Electricity Reliability Corporation, NERC, in multiple regions of the country this summer due to “premature shuttering of (nuclear and coal) “baseload power generating plants”. This is likely to immediately affect the portions of eastern Montana served by MDU which relies upon electricity supplied by MISO, the Midcontinent Independent Service Organizations.

The goal by some is to close the Colstrip plant and to rely instead on unreliable wind and solar renewables or rely at peak times to importing enough power for the state’s emergency needs.

The problem, according to Commissioners, is that when Montana has minus 45-degree temperatures, as it did just 2 years ago and will certainly happen again, NorthWestern Electricity might be unable to buy power from any other source to keep Montanans from freezing in the night. The unavailability of importable power is due to, as NERC and MISO point out, premature closure of reliable coal and nuclear plants, called “baseload” due to their 24/7/52 potential, prior to reliable alternatives being built and able to meet Montana’s energy needs.

The specific threat to Montanans is the actual or announced closures of reliable coal and nuclear generating plants in the western region from which all power production in the western states, including Montana, is sourced. The only answer, the Commissioners aver, is energy independence for Montana. This means that Montana has existential need of Colstrip’s entire output as the only reliable means of preventing freezing deaths of Montanans as recently occurred in Texas.

” If the legislatures in Washington and Oregon don’t want to use any of our icky electrons, that is their choice, but there is simply no resource other than Colstrip that is large enough and dependable enough to keep Montanans from calamity in the extreme cold that Montana is well known for,” said Commissioner O’Donnell.

The Commissioners point out that the Colstrip plant is already built and operating and therefore is a very prudent resource.

“When the wind doesn’t blow and the sun doesn’t shine” isn’t just a familiar saying, it underscores the fact that favorable weather must not be relied upon to keep Montanans alive.

The state’s coal-fired power plant has provided reliable, affordable baseload power to Montanans for many years. Because it was built at this location for the express purpose of being adjacent to a large, well-run coal mine, Colstrip is referred to as a “mine-mouth” plant. That is, its reliability is greatly enhanced by not needing to rely on faraway fuel source. Because Colstrip is a very well-maintained plant, Montana’s nearly 370,000 ratepaying customers should expect to enjoy its reliability for many years to come. Commissioners Pinocci and O’Donnell also point to the greatly important need to utilize innovative science advances to address Colstrip’s ever growing coal ash “ponds” in a beneficial way. Montana’s Department of Environmental Review has already granted a “Beneficial Use Determination” to one such company to entirely transform the plant’s toxic waste into an environmentally benign concrete additive. This would provide the domestic concrete industry with an urgently needed alternative to coal ash currently imported from China as well as a probable American source of Rare Earth Minerals, so vital to our national defense.

This alternative to just spending hundreds of millions of dollars to move the ash “from one hole to another”, will provide 300 to 400 good paying jobs in Colstrip for as many as 40 years.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures, and given that the U.S. is feeling the effects of a global energy crisis due in large part to the shutdown of coal-fired power plants in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, the commissioners believe that we are obligated to alert the p[people of Montana accordingly.

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