

Utah needs energy answers

Deseret News editorial

Published: July 19, 2008

Readers of this newspaper shouldn't have been surprised this week by reports that Rocky Mountain Power is asking for yet another rate increase — this one for \$160.6 million overall, while the Public Service Commission still is considering an earlier request for a \$75.45 million increase.

Earlier this year, the Deseret News reported that Utahns soon would have to pay a lot more for the privilege of turning on their lights and booting up their computers. The state faces too much pressure from new residents and new energy-thirsty technology on the one end, and too much pressure to abandon coal-fired generating plants in the name of global warming on the other.

There may, of course, be other factors involved in the size of the rate increase Rocky Mountain Power has requested. Absent competitive market forces, it's hard to be sure the utility is as efficient as it ought to be. The Public Service Commission has a duty to investigate that fully before acting on the requested hike.

But one thing is as certain today as it was earlier this year. Utah could benefit from a realistic energy policy that envisions the sort of continual growth the state is expected to experience. People certainly don't want to experience the loss of power, especially on hot summer days. But they also don't want to pay prices so high they eventually harm economic development.

Utahns have been spoiled by cheap energy, thanks in large part to the state's abundance of cheap coal. The current supply of coal generators, however, is expected to leave the state 750 megawatts short of its needs by 2010 and, according to estimates, 2,500 megawatts short by 2012.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. has appointed a blue-ribbon task force to study the issue, but he has made it clear he does not support nuclear power. More coal-fired plants also are out — partly because of their harmful CO₂ emissions and partly because other states, notably California, no longer will buy such power from Utah. Technology to make cleaner coal plants is years away, if it ever can be made to work without creating other problems. What exactly is in, is not clear.

Meanwhile, renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind, can at best provide a small percentage of the state's needs. By all means, their production should be encouraged, but without a realistic strategy, the state has no choice but to buy its power elsewhere.

With many other states facing a similar situation, that is an expensive route to take.

We suggest an aggressive move toward nuclear power — the safest, cleanest and most reliable choice. It wouldn't spare Utahns from rate increases for electricity, but it would provide a measure of energy security and independence in a world that needs more and more juice all the time.

© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved