

Editorial: Accelerate move away from coal

It's time, probably past time, for utilities to put greater urgency on abandoning coal — even if that also means taking some gambles on brownouts and blackouts, price volatility and newer technology.

The Register's editorial

Published 6:30 a.m. CT Feb. 26, 2023

For many years, few people have seriously disputed the idea that burning coal for electricity has to stop, eventually.

The argument these days is over the “eventually.” In recognition of the severity of the effects of human-caused climate change, it’s time in Iowa to replace that word with a date, no later than 2035.

State regulators, the state’s largest utility and a range of advocates are debating this issue right now.

What is Wind PRIME?

A year ago, MidAmerican Energy announced its Wind PRIME proposal, in which it would add over 2,000 megawatts of wind power (expanding current wind capacity by about 30%) and a smaller amount of solar energy. It also pledged to research other ways to reduce emissions, including carbon capture. Company officials said it would keep prices low and called it a major step forward in achieving several long-range MidAmerican targets, including having the ability to serve all customer demand through renewable energy and reaching “net zero” greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Environmental groups, big tech companies and the state Office of Consumer Advocate have challenged various portions of the Wind PRIME plans before the Iowa Utilities Board. A hearing was held last week before the three-person regulatory panel, which has the authority to approve or deny all or part of the plan and its associated economic projections.

Groups push for more solar, more storage

The Iowa Environmental Council, the Environmental Policy & Law Center and the Sierra Club argue that MidAmerican did not properly consider alternative mixes of technology for what became Wind PRIME. Moreover, the groups say, more aggressive investment in solar generation, electricity storage and earlier retirements of the company’s five coal plants would be better for the environment — and would not sacrifice MidAmerican’s reliability or cause customers’ or the company’s costs to spiral.

MidAmerican is far from the only electrical utility to say it's hanging onto coal generation in part to help ensure that the lights stay on. Demand for power keeps increasing, and the output from wind turbines and solar panels is variable compared with a coal or natural gas plant. Regulators have to take reliability, the environment, prices and more into account in deciding whether Wind PRIME meets the ambiguous standard in Iowa law (very generally, that a utility's plans be "reasonable").

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More: Opinion: MidAmerican should pursue a balanced, coal-free portfolio in Wind PRIME

Ditching coal would be worth some risk

Thousands of pages of depositions, studies, legal briefs and other documents will guide the Utilities Board on that question. But this editorial board is free to take a step back from the law to say that it's time, probably past time, for utilities to put much greater urgency on abandoning coal — even if doing so also means taking some gambles on brownouts and blackouts, price volatility and newer technology.

Scientists have long known the health risks of emissions from power plants, including sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, particulate matter, carbon dioxide, mercury and other hazardous air pollutants. While the industry has significantly reduced many pollutants over the past two decades, they are known to contribute to development of heart or lung diseases, such as asthma and bronchitis, increased susceptibility to respiratory and cardiac symptoms, greater numbers of emergency room visits and hospital admissions, and premature deaths, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Adding new urgency to human risk arguments: Coal power is among the worst offenders for carbon dioxide emissions. Climate scientists expect the CO₂ already in our atmosphere to intensify disastrous effects on humans and other life that we're already seeing through extreme weather and disease — and not in the far future. Children of the 1960s have good odds to be around when global warming hits 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, a figure that's long been seen as a potentially critical threshold. Below it, scientists argue, we adapt to a changed world; above it, we scarp to survive in a transformed world.

In other words, holding onto coal until MidAmerican is absolutely sure it will never need it is a gamble, too. Yes, MidAmerican's choices are a drop in the bucket when it comes to worldwide emissions. And, yes, leadership at the federal level that could far more effectively prompt progress on this issue has been all but absent. But individual action drives collective action, and this Des Moines-based utility has the opportunity to show the way for its peers close to home and around the world.

More: MidAmerican Energy wants to study small nuclear power plants. How would they work?

Internal MidAmerican studies shed new light

The Utilities Board took an encouraging step last month by ordering MidAmerican to publicly release redacted versions of two internal studies about its forecasts. (Refreshingly, regulators cited, in part, the Iowa open records law's presumption of transparency.) The documents arguably lend support to the environmentalists' claims that this project should include more solar and less coal.

READ: *Redacted "zero emissions" study | Coal plant economics assessment*

We'll echo a target that environmentalists have voiced: MidAmerican should turn off its coal plants no later than 2035.

Customers and other Iowans should tell the company as much.

— *Lucas Grundmeier, on behalf of the Register editorial board*

This editorial is the opinion of the Des Moines Register's editorial board: Carol Hunter, executive editor; Lucas Grundmeier, opinion editor; Rachelle Chase, opinion columnist; and Richard Doak and Rox Laird, editorial board members.

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