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Choose other renewable sources

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Exelon operates 17 nuclear power reactors, more than any other company, and has proposed to build two near Victoria. This is part of a wave of proposals to build commercial reactors in the United States, eight in Texas alone.

Having failed miserably to deliver on the 1950s' promise that nuclear would be "too cheap to meter," we are now told nuclear power will save us from climate change. If you don't like coal, you have to take nuclear, goes the nuclear establishment's hopeful mantra. It is a false choice. Replacing coal with nuclear is risky, costly, and unnecessary. Contrary to many people's opinion, renewable energy sources can provide ample and reliable electricity for the United States. Texas has greater wind energy potential than its present electricity generation from all sources; it is greater also than 104 U.S. nuclear power plants combined.

Though Texas is the national leader in wind-generated electricity, it has barely captured a whisper of its potential. Wind energy is already competitive with, or more economical, than nuclear energy – about 8 cents per kilowatt hour in very good areas. A recent independent assessment by the Keystone Center, which included industry representatives, estimated nuclear costs at 8 to 11 cents. Intermittency is not a significant issue until very high levels of penetration. For instance, a 2006 study prepared for the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission found that an increase of just over 2 percent in operating reserves would be sufficient to underpin a 25 percent renewable energy standard supplied by wind.

In January, MidAmerican Energy Holdings, which is owned by Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway, dropped plans to build a nuclear power plant in Idaho on grounds that it could not provide reasonably priced energy to its customers. That should give Victoria pause.

Solar energy is somewhat more expensive today, but costs are coming down rapidly. In December 2007, Nanosolar produced the first solar panels costing less than a dollar a watt at its factory in Silicon Valley, where real estate is very expensive and labor is well paid. Recent trends indicate that nuclear power may well become economically obsolete compared to solar panels installed on commercial parking lots and rooftops in megawatt chunks by the time the proposed nuclear power plants come on line.

New nuclear plants would add to the country's problem of nuclear waste. The federal government has long been in default of its obligations to existing nuclear plant operators to take the waste away from their sites. Nuclear utilities have had to take the government to court to recover added storage expenses, which will cost the taxpayers billions or possibly even tens of billions of dollars over time. To imagine that the federal government will take charge of waste from new plants where it does not even have contracts is wishful thinking.

Much more likely, Victoria County and Texas would be stuck with it. The two nuclear reactors proposed near Victoria would withdraw 75,000 acre-feet per year from the Guadalupe River. To make nuclear a mainstay of power generation in the West and Southwest is to put reliable power generation at risk. For

instance, last September, a nuclear unit at Browns Ferry belonging to the Tennessee Valley Authority had to be shut down for lack of water. Such problems can be expected to intensify in a warming world.

By contrast, solar photovoltaics and wind-generated electricity do not need water. The people of the region should also note some of Exelon's history. At its Braidwood plant in Illinois, Exelon contaminated its neighbors' groundwater with radioactive tritium; it did not publicly disclose the contamination for years. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission stated that the company "failed to perform adequate surveys to identify the extent of radiation and contamination levels and the potential hazards associated with the radioactive material and to take actions necessary to control the material."

In 2006, Illinois took the company to court for violating the state's groundwater protection laws. The attraction of the taxes that would be paid by large nuclear power plants in a mainly rural area is understandable. Why not invite Nanosolar or First Solar or a similar company to set up a manufacturing plant for solar cells in the area instead? That way, Victoria County and Texas could become a part of the move to clean, 21st century energy systems with well-paying jobs rather than being mired in the radioactive ways of the past.

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