

Western Slope can achieve a cleaner, cheaper energy future

By Guest Columnist Grand Junction Sentinel

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By Gretchen Nicholoff

In the North Fork Valley of the Gunnison River, where I live, coal mines have long been an integral part of our history and community, as they probably will continue to be for many years to come. But the North Fork Valley is also home to Solar Energy International, and in recent years, interest and enthusiasm for using local renewable sources of energy has been growing.

However, proposed oil and gas leasing here has me worried. I have to ask if the pursuit of fossil fuels will prevent us from achieving a healthy, sustainable future by putting our clean air and water at risk. And, is continued reliance on traditional fuels going to move our community, state and nation down an environmentally friendly path to energy independence?

There is good news right here in Colorado. Back in 2004, we became the first state in the nation to adopt a renewable energy portfolio standard. The law, approved by voters at the ballot box as a citizen-initiated proposal, mandated that investor-owned utilities generate or purchase 10 percent of their retail electric sales from renewable energy sources by 2020. Because that standard was readily achieved ahead of schedule, in 2007 and 2010 the Colorado Legislature increased the requirements for investor-owned utilities to 30 percent from renewable energy sources and 10 percent for rural electric co-ops by 2020.

While Colorado is off to a good start in utilizing renewable sources of energy, what about the rest of the nation?

A report released last November persuasively makes the case for a cleaner energy future. The report describes a plan that would phase out coal-based and nuclear power and would aggressively invest in both efficiency and renewables.

Published by the Civil Society Institute, and written by Synapse Energy Economics, Inc., the report compares current "business as usual" with a "transition scenario" that maps out a much cleaner energy future by 2050. The transition scenario identified in the report would save taxpayers money, better protect public health, conserve water and reduce emission of climate change-related gases, the report says.

The greatest savings achieved in the study would be in the cost of generating electricity. Significant savings are to be achieved by not building new coal or nuclear plants and systematically phasing out all coal and a portion of the nuclear fleet. This can be done with off-the-shelf technologies and efficiency, and the report makes no assumptions about as-yet-unreleased innovations currently in research and development.

The report projects a net savings of \$83 billion over 40 years, with the added benefit that eliminating pollution from coal-fired power plants by 2050 is expected to prevent somewhere around 55,000 premature deaths over the next several decades.

There is further good news about jobs. The report projects that nearly half a million jobs will be created as a direct result of moving toward a renewable energy future, and, given the multiplier effect of job creation, 3.1 million total jobs are anticipated. Investment in energy efficiency will give a much-needed immediate boost to manufacturing businesses.

Some wise person once said that change is the nature of the universe. Yet we, as human beings, often have a hard time dealing with change. I say this as a 41-year resident of the North Fork Valley, where coal mining has been going on about as long as fruit growing — and with many of the same economic ups and downs.

But coal is not the energy source of the future. Now is the time to stare the future in the face and capitalize on the incredible wealth of renewable energy sources right here in our own backyards, where solar, geothermal, low-head hydro power and even biofuels are all feasible. It is ironic that the Western Slope of Colorado, which is so well-situated to transition to a renewable energy economy, is the focus for so much extraction of fossil fuels for use in communities far away.

I harbor a dream that my home, the North Fork Valley, can serve as a model of sustainability as America moves toward national energy independence. I am inspired and challenged by the example of the Oberlin Project, a long-term cooperative effort among private and public entities in northern Ohio. The Oberlin Project's aim is "to revitalize the local economy, eliminate carbon emissions, restore local agriculture, food supply and forestry, and create a new, sustainable base for economic and community development."

If cloudy, damp northern Ohio can envision a sustainable future, surely sunny western Colorado can as well.

One step we can take right now is to read the Synapse report and begin to implement its recommendations. Go to our website <http://www.wccongress.org> and scroll down to Renewables — good news for Colorado consumers.

Gretchen Nicholoff is the president of Western Colorado Congress, an alliance to protect and enhance the quality of life in western Colorado.