

Concerned About Climate Change? Vote!

by
Mitchell Roth

Anyone who has lived in Alaska for more than a few years knows that global warming is real. I live in Girdwood and have seen the ski season shortened by 8 weeks in the last 6 years due to warmer temperatures. The scientific consensus is strongly in agreement that the warming we see is due primarily to elevated atmospheric CO2 levels caused mainly by the combustion of fossil fuels for transportation and electric power generation.

On April 19, Chugach Electric Association member-owners begin voting to fill two seats on the Board of Directors who represent the members of the cooperative. I've been one of those members for around a decade and I've filled out my annual ballot, but this time I'm on it. I'm running for the CEA Board because I'm dissatisfied with the current directors, who have strong ties to the fossil fuel industry, and no plan to control electric rates or address the root causes of climate change.

As CEA, we own the central portion of the Railbelt electricity grid, which runs from the Kenai Peninsula to the Mat-Su valley, and serves about half of all Alaskans. Combined, CEA and Anchorage Municipal Light & Power supply over half the railbelt electricity from their generators. About 80% of that electricity comes from just one source: Cook Inlet natural gas. The majority of Cook Inlet natural gas is produced by a single company: Hilcorp.

This dependence leaves us vulnerable. Our electricity, \$0.22/kWh on my last bill, is more expensive than any other state except Hawaii. Around 35% of that (the "cost of power adjustment" on your bill), is fuel costs. Cook Inlet natural gas is more than twice as expensive as gas in the lower 48, and that price is only going to rise. Geologically speaking, we're not running out of gas in Cook Inlet. But as we draw down existing fields, the costs of new exploration and construction will drive the price up far beyond what we've seen. A state study from last year suggests that by 2030, new gas production would need to sell for nearly double the current price to be economic for the companies to develop. Potential large projects like the Donlin and Pebble Mine proposals could draw enough gas to make that happen much sooner.

How can we use less gas? Our new natural gas plants are more efficient than the older ones. Efficiency, in our power plants and our houses, is a key piece of the puzzle. By itself, it's not enough. Ultimately, we need to break our dependence on expensive fossil fuels. Policies to curb climate change are likely to drive fossil fuel prices even higher than economics will. For example, the tax regime in British Columbia would add 35% to our gas prices if it were happening here. The impacts of climate change hit harder every year, and Alaska is warming at twice the global average rate. Over the next few decades, climate change will cost the state hundreds of millions of dollars every year. Ethically and economically, we need to be part of the solution.

We must prepare now for our energy future. This future will include more renewables, energy storage and smart systems for moving electricity when and where it is needed. To get there, we need to collaborate with other Railbelt utilities, fix transmission bottlenecks, and eliminate inefficiencies. We need to improve our system to allow low cost renewables to be integrated into the grid, keep rates down, and prepare for the future. Without these improvements, we'll be stuck with skyrocketing costs and no quick fix. We can't get there immediately, but if we don't start now, we can't get there at all.

Unlike most of the country, we're lucky enough to own our electricity grid. CEA is a cooperative, as are most of the Railbelt utilities, and we can decide its priorities. Elections for the Board of Directors begin soon for CEA and are already underway for the Matanuska and Homer Electric Associations. In each of these elections there are challengers to the incumbents who are all-in for 100% renewable grids and who know how to get there. If you want to do something about climate change and also save hundreds and eventually thousands on your annual electric bill, vote for those challengers. Make that decision to vote now and make a difference.

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