

Time to innovate, not eliminate

by Jon McKinney

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There has been a fair amount of discussion — some of it backed up by misinformation — about ways to speed up the electricity grid’s transition away from coal and natural gas towards more wind, solar and other forms of renewable energy.

Unfortunately, anyone who urges caution about this transition is sometimes portrayed unfairly as a naysayer who cares too much about fossil fuels. However, Sen. Joe Manchin is right to insist on a thoughtful, fact-based discussion about the need for energy policies that encourage “innovation, not elimination.” That sounds like a very reasonable approach to me.

Sen. Manchin’s insistence is important because it doesn’t do any good to have an enormous number of wind farms and solar panels if they cannot produce power at the flip of a switch. Right now, wind and solar are the least reliable source of electricity we have because the wind doesn’t blow all the time and the sun doesn’t shine at night.

Wind produces electricity about 35% of the time, and solar is just 25%. California suffered rolling blackouts last summer, in part, because they rely so heavily on solar power. Wind and solar will become more reliable, but it will take time to develop the battery storage they need to back them up.

Sen. Manchin is right to question a congressional proposal that would force a massive and hasty shift to wind and solar power. Studies put the cost of this shift at well in excess of \$1 trillion, and there is no guarantee that the electricity grid will be reliable with so much wind and solar power. States like West Virginia that rely on coal would bear most of the burden.

Electric utilities are already increasing their reliance on renewables without any new very expensive mandates. Also, wind and solar don't need any more tax breaks.

One congressional proposal under consideration right now would cost taxpayers as much as \$260 billion to add more wind and solar power to the electricity grid. However, at least half the nation's electricity will come from wind, solar and other zero-carbon electricity sources by 2030 without expensive new mandates or more unnecessary tax breaks.

Speaking as a former utility commissioner, I hope Sen. Manchin will continue his efforts to see that any policies considered by Congress ensure a problem-free transition and allow time to innovate, not eliminate. This is the best way to make sure the lights stay on, even with more wind and solar power.



Jon McKinney previously served as chairman of the Public Service Commission of West Virginia.