

Don't dispatch with dispatchable energy

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There's no question that the American electric grid is in the midst of an energy transition. The grid has grown more diverse with a number of new sources, including renewables, coming online over recent years. In fact, according to the [Energy Information Administration](#), thanks in part to generous subsidies, renewable generation is on pace to double its market share by 2050.

However, that same forecast also projected our country's need for additional electricity sources to grow as economic disruptions spurred by the pandemic are corrected and as more aspects of our daily lives are electrified. In other words, we will need more power to meet the expected rise in energy demand. But even against the backdrop of unmistakable momentum for renewables, a cursory glance at the headlines, from price spikes to grid emergencies to electricity rationing, underscores the still vital role played by traditional energy sources, including coal, in powering our nation today and in the future.

Rational public discourse surrounding the American energy sector has long centered on an "all of the above" approach that values a diverse blend of fuel sources with distinct advantages and disadvantages. This is not a controversial approach, nor should it be polarizing. Rather, this commonsense mindset acknowledges the complexity of meeting our nation's vast, and increasing, demand for power and seeks to address those complexities by thoughtfully using a mix of the resources available.

As renewables have become more readily accessible, some stakeholders, from state and local governments to advocacy organizations, have become increasingly eager to further speed up the move away from traditional sources such as natural gas and coal. This headlong rush to renewables is premature — and not just because fossil fuels still account for 60% of the nation's electricity demand (and at least a quarter of the demand for 44 states).

Fossil fuels are essential to ensuring a reliable, affordable power supply. Aggressive policies that seek to phase out fossil fuels, some of which aim to create a carbon-free grid by 2035, would jeopardize grid resilience and reliability and create financial strain for consumers.

When demand peaks, dispatchable energy, power that can be adjusted to meet shifts in what's needed by consumers, is essential to keeping the lights on. Since [California's rolling blackouts of August 2020](#), nearby states have retired about 4.4 GW of dispatchable fossil fuel-fired capacity. However, California itself had to lean on natural gas to prevent similar rolling blackouts this past summer, further underscoring the critical importance of maintaining a diverse grid.

But this is not just a summer occurrence. During the severe winter weather conditions that affected much of the central United States in February 2021, coal-fueled power plants increased their capacity to supply almost half of the electricity in the Midcontinent Independent System Operator and the Southwest Power Pool regions. More recently, we have seen the nation's coal fleet [step up to meet demand](#) amid high gas prices over the past several months.

It's also important to understand the technical hurdles that must be overcome to transition the grid. The process is not a binary flip of the switch from one fuel to the next. Take, for example, the transmission system updates needed to decarbonize the grid. Some transmission projects take up to 20 years to complete. If these timelines hold, and there's little reason to think projects will move faster given the ever-present threat of delay that looms over all energy infrastructure development, the transmission necessary to decarbonize the grid could take far longer than a bumper sticker-type slogan timeline would allow.

A diverse grid is essential to meeting our full energy potential. To make this goal more attainable, policymakers should work to incentivize investment and innovation as a means of achieving reduced emissions. Rather than working to eliminate fossil fuels from the mix, reducing the nation's generating capacity in the process, we should find ways to continue to make fossil fuels, including coal, more environmentally sustainable.

The owners of the nation's coal fleet have invested over \$100 billion over the last two decades, enabling the industry to reduce traditional air pollutants by 90% over the course of 20 years. We can build on these gains to drive even stronger results. For example, the carbon capture facility under development at the [Prairie State Energy Campus](#) in Illinois represents a significant leap forward, and efforts such as those underway by [Consol Energy](#) can move us to net-zero or even net-negative coal generation in the coming years.

In a time of continued disruption in our daily lives, the path forward for policymakers should be clear: Decisions about the grid transition should be thoughtful and data-driven, not rushed and political. Moreover, it's essential that policymakers, regulators, grid operators, and consumers accurately value different attributes of energy resources, including dispatchable sources such as coal, as part of a diverse, reliable, and resilient grid.

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