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Addressing climate change realities and steady progress

By Clint Churchill and Ed MacNaughton

Climate change is real. We must aspire to low cost, low carbon, reliable energy for all. However, the Practical Policy Institute questions proceeding down the "blinders on, 100% renewable electricity at any cost" path without carefully considering the implications to land use and ratepayer cost.

Hawaii is not alone. Residents in states around the country are starting to rebel against unsightly wind and solar projects and the land they require. By one estimate, to provide enough electricity to power Manhattan with renewables "would require paving over nearly the whole state of Connecticut with windmills and solar farms."

In the institute's May 26 "Island Voices" piece, we pointed out that, by 2045 on Oahu, to achieve 100% renewable may require the removal of more than 20,000 acres from potential residential development or sustainable agriculture for utility-level solar farms — and that would account for the electrification of only one-half of Oahu's vehicles.

The response from the University of Hawaii-Manoa's Chip Fletcher in his June 2 "Island Voices" piece? He starts with a baseless attempt at assailing the institute's authors. Fletcher then never addresses the core issue raised in our article, saying only that "we cannot afford to simply blanket the West Side with utility solar farms." No viable alternative is offered, which begs the question, where? This is a real issue that can't be resolved by basking in the glory of a goal set seven years ago.

We need to face the realities relative to the 100% renewable goal. The first reality is that the Kahuku windmill project may be Oahu's last significant windmill farm due to the visual blight and strong rural community pushback. We applaud the progress to date on rooftop and other distributed solar — more needed! The second reality is that utility-scale solar projects are, by far, the only foreseeable pathway to get anywhere near 100% renewable. Thus, the trade-off question of land use vs. decarbonization.

ISLAND VOICES

Clint Churchill, left, and Ed MacNaughton are retired businessmen who represent the Practical Policy Institute of Hawaii.

Clearly this is an Oahu problem. Oahu does not have the options available to the Big Island, which has geothermal and a large land area where solar and wind farms will rarely be seen, nor Kauai with the opportunity for solar-powered pumped-hydro storage — not to mention a population base 92% smaller than Oahu's. With a much denser population base of 1,700 residents per square mile compared to the 50 residents per square mile on the Big Island and 130 residents per square mile on Kauai, the land use dilemma on Oahu is exacerbated.

It has been said that we should never set policy, in this case 100% renewable energy, based on hope. But that is exactly what we have done. In the words of state Rep. Chris Lee, "No one had ever done the due diligence to figure out how this (100% renewable) could be achieved." A statement by Jeff Mikulina, a longtime renewable energy advocate, caught our attention: "Our journey to 100% renewable energy should move at the speed of innovation." We concur. Without a significant technology breakthrough in the cost of battery storage to make intermittent solar power both dependable and affordable, and some renewable option other than land-gobbling utility solar farms, is 100% renewable on Oahu practical?

We suggest lessening the rhetoric of "existential threat, tipping point soon to be reached" and continue on our successful path to date. The mainstream news media has been all but silent on the fact that per capita CO2 emissions in the United States peaked in 1974, declining ever since, and the fact that total CO2 emissions in the United States peaked in 2006, declining ever since. Let's continue Hawaii's steady contribution to this progress, but perhaps accept that the most practical way to achieve dependable, affordable electricity on Oahu — with acceptable land-use trade-off — is low carbon, not zero carbon.

COMMENTARY