

## Idaho Statesman

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### America's energy solution must involve reducing demand

In the discussion and media coverage surrounding energy, center stage typically goes to the technology used to generate it: wind vs. natural gas, coal vs. solar.

Congress is currently considering the passage of a Renewable Electricity Standard (RES) that will require all electric utilities, including those operating in Idaho, to generate significant portions of their electricity from suitable renewable sources in the coming decades.

Much of the debate surrounding this legislation will focus on its potential economic impact. Will we be forced to pay more for electricity, forcing further stagnation in the economy? Or will these regulations stimulate a new resurgence in manufacturing as we scramble to produce more wind turbines and solar panels? The discussion will be a fascinating one, and we will watch it unfold in the coming months.

But electricity generation represents only the supply side of the proposition. All too often, the demand side - consumption - gets lost in the shuffle. We look to renewable energy to help meet the "growing need" for power. The underlying assumptions are that we will continue to require more electricity, and that growth in consumption is unconditionally good.

I think it's high time we examine that assumption. Is more better?

More to the point, is it appropriate that we consider all uses of electricity equally? Is it time to treat energy with the same regulatory firmness as we treat water? Deeply embedded in water rights law is the concept of beneficial use. Water rights owners have the responsibility to put their resource to the best use possible. If they can't meet that standard, then they must relinquish their rights to the next junior rights holder.

But when it comes to energy in general, and electricity in particular, regulatory bodies are blind to the specific use, instead allowing the free market to be the judge of best use. People should be able to purchase whatever appliance they want; that's the free market. Homes should be built to whatever size and specifications the owner or developer chooses. If the homes are too inefficient, or the appliances too wasteful, then the consumer will reject them in favor of choices that cost less to operate, or so the theory goes.

The problem with that theory is that the cost of energy is just too low to bring about significant changes in consumer behavior. If last summer's gasoline prices are any indication, electricity would have to become two to three times more expensive than its current price to make significant changes.

And here's the ultimate irony: Prices high enough to get the average consumer's attention are simply too high for robust economic development in the manufacturing and commercial sectors of our economy. Utility costs are much more important to factories and shopping malls than they are, relatively speaking, to the typical homeowner.

Some may call for increased government regulation in the form of more stringent building codes or better efficiency standards for appliances. These should be considered, but there are other approaches to address large-spread behavioral problems.

Those of us who've been around for five decades or more recall a time when our nation's interstates were obscenely strewn with litter thoughtlessly thrown from passing cars. In no small part through the power of the media using the tool of public service announcements, the percentage of people who would engage in this activity is now vanishingly small.

Similarly, Westerners have long known that water is much more valuable than its actual cost suggests. What will it take for us to treat energy with the same reverence? Let's hope we find out, because if we wait for it to hurt us in the wallet, it will be too late.

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