

October, 2017

350Montana



Our Energy Future?

**A collection of editorials
and letters to editors
of Montana newspapers**

Montana Newspaper Addresses

Billings Gazette
PO Box 36300
Billings, MT, 59107-6300
Website: www.billingsgazette.com
Limit 250 words

Bozeman Daily Chronicle
PO Box 1188
Bozeman, MT, 59771
Website: www.bozemandailychronicle.com
Limit 300 words

Daily Inter Lake
727 East Idaho St.
Kalispell, MT, 59901
Website: www.dailyinterlake.com
Limit 300 words

Great Falls Tribune
205 River Drive South
Great Falls, MT, 59405
Website: www.greatfallstribune.com
Limit 200 words

The Missoula Independent (weekly)
PO Box 8275
Missoula, MT, 59807
Email: independent@missoulanews.com

Missoulian
PO Box 8029
Missoula, MT, 59807-8029
Website: www.missoulian.com
Limit 200 words

Montana Standard
25 West Granite St.
Butte, MT, 59701
Website: www.mtstandard.com
Limit 400 words

Helena Independent Record
P.O. Box 4249
Helena, MT, 59604
Website: www.helenair.com
Limit 200 words

Missoula Current
P.O. Box 2935
Missoula, MT, 59806
Website: www.missoulacurrent.com

Other Addresses

Robert C. Rowe, Pres. & CEO
NorthWestern Energy
11 East Park St.
Butte, MT, 597011711

Public Service Commission
PO Box 202601
Helena, MT, 596202601

Commissioners
Travis Kavulla, Dist. 1
Tony O'Donnell, Dist. 2
Roger Koopman, Dist. 3,
Bob Lake, Dist. 4
Brad Johnson, Dist. 5

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Following is a collection of letters and editorials written over a 14 month stretch by Montanans from all over the state, literally from Superior to Billings. The letters are about renewable energy and NorthWestern Energy's efforts to slow or block its development. NorthWestern Energy has not only pressured the Public Service Commission and the Legislature, but it has also misled the public with "greenwashing", claiming credit for being a lot greener than it actually is. The collection begins in June, 2016 and ends in August, 2017, so to see the most recent letters, flip to the back. To keep up with the latest letters and editorials about these important issues after August of 2017, go to our website at www.350Montana.org and look for letters to the editor under the heading "Action".

After learning more about the important issue of Montana's energy future, if you wish to write your own letter, there's a list of Montana's newspapers on the next page. Since these matters affect every part of the state, send your letter not only to the newspaper that serves your area but to other newspapers as well. Most newspapers have a "dropbox" on their websites for letters to the editor, and it's easy to cut and paste your letter into one or more of these. While you're at it, why not send a copy of your letter also to Bob Rowe, CEO of NorthWestern Energy, and to the Public Service Commissioners? Their addresses are given as well. If you succeed in publishing a letter, please mail us a copy to 350 Montana, P.O. Box 7006,

Missoula, MT, 59807, or email it to us at 350Montana@gmail.com, so we can put it on our website. Don't forget to give us the name of the newspaper and date of publication.

NorthWestern Energy has not only pressured the Public Service Commission and the Legislature, but it has also misled the public with "greenwashing", claiming credit for being a lot greener than it actually is.

If you're new to writing letters to the editor, be aware that you will need to give your name, address, phone number, and usually email address also. Only your name and occasionally the city where you live will be published. The phone number is so the newspaper can call you to verify that you're a real person who lives in Montana and that you submitted the letter. Keep your letter brief, to the point and within the paper's word limit (200 words is a good length although some papers take longer letters). If you have special qualifications, you may be able to write a longer op-ed or qualify as a guest columnist in your area of expertise. Remain reasonably polite even if you're angry, and don't call people names or use profanity if you want your letter published.

Table of Contents

Speaking truth to power.....	1
Imagine example-setting future for Montana energy.....	3
NWE acts against customer interests.....	4
Public utilities should be publicly owned.....	5
Time to aggressively promote renewables.....	6
Time for decision-makers to take climate action seriously.....	6
Writing on the wall.....	8
Montana needs renewables, now.....	8
Storage is Montana's missing link to renewables.....	9
Hedging bets on climate change.....	9
350Montana Visits NorthWestern Energy.....	10
350Montana Visits the PSC.....	11
More action needed, Northwestern.....	12
NorthWestern's missed opportunities.....	12
Montana solar energy threatened.....	13
PSC, NorthWestern Energy push industry, jobs away.....	13
Gazette opinion: Montana PSC clouds solar's future.....	14
Montana PSC creates barriers to solar energy.....	15
NorthWestern clings to fossil fuels.....	16
NorthWestern must earn renewable energy reputation.....	17
Who will watch Montana's utility watchdog?.....	18
NorthWestern's bad bets cost Montana consumers.....	19

Imagine example-setting future for Montana energy

*Missoulian, June 23, 2016 op-ed
by Jeff Smith*

Back in the late 70's, the wood products industry was king in western Montana. There was a lumber mill right downtown and mammoth plywood and pulp mills to the east and west. It smelled like money, as copper king William Clark once said about the air pollution in Butte.

I was right in the middle of it, using a big Husqvarna to saw trees for Champion International. The union loggers and the gypo crews I worked with all made good livings. We couldn't cut enough trees.

None of us could have imagined the future we have now, with both 500-employee mills vanished and a Missoula Osprey ballpark standing where the tepee burners were. Wood products' percentage of the current economy is minuscule in our post-industrial Missoula.

Yet our population, standard of living and numberless amenities have jumped off the charts. Why? In large part because we ignored the naysayers and embraced a new, diverse and more sustainable economy.

We needed a change. As reporter Dick Manning documented in this newspaper, according to Champion International's Montana property tax inventory, when the the company pulled up stakes and moved to South America, less than 1 percent of its 850,000 acres in western Montana were well-stocked with trees larger than 9 inches on the stump. Only 7 percent was half-covered in "merchantable" timber. The rest was gone.

Right now, the naysayers are at it again, telling us we can't move from coal and fracked gas and oil despite the fact our climate is going south, fracking poisons our water, and the only market for strip-mined coal is stupid, necessitating its long, dangerous haul to China.

And, of course, they deny or obfuscate the existential crisis gripping our planet. The Earth is hotter than it's been in 600,000 years. It took centuries for greenhouse

gases to accumulate and affect our climate last time, something we've managed in 100 years.

And that's the crux.

The good news is we have the technologies, we have the money and, Lord knows, we have the skilled workforce to move to a new energy system powered by wind, water and solar. We do not yet have the policies to do so.

As the Billings Gazette reported recently, a company is looking at deploying a wind farm near Colstrip that would power 300,000 homes. Wind is established as the least expensive energy around. As a former governor used to say, "Montana is the Saudi Arabia of wind." Let's do all we can to encourage this and other projects.

As long as it continues to snow and rain, it looks like we're using our water resources at just about peak capacity. And as for solar, there isn't a solar installer around who's not going "balls to the walls" right now to get residential solar to their customers. Community solar, too, is at a tipping point, with a "solar farm" in East Missoula and others in Lolo and up in the Flathead.

Montana has to make sure that our regulated utilities do the right things to further solar power. The Brookings Institute recently concluded that, when all the costs and benefits are evaluated, net metering imposes no additional costs on non-solar customers, and, when the societal benefits of reducing carbon emissions are calculated, it is a no brainer to expand net metering for residential and community solar. Let's imagine a future where Montana takes the lead, our regulated utilities get the right marching orders, the fossil fuels stay in the ground where they belong, and our state sets an example for the rest of the world.

• Jeff Smith is 350Montana co-chair

Northwestern Energy acts against Montana customer interests

Missoulian, July 31, 2016 lte

What do NorthWestern Energy customers want?

We don't really want to buy more energy. Instead we want the things that energy produces. Usually it's cheaper to get these energy benefits by installing efficient light bulbs, weatherizing our houses, upgrading our appliances, or putting solar panels on the roof.

Using less energy to get the same benefits or producing our own energy, however, threatens NorthWestern Energy's business model, according to which stockholder profits are directly tied to the amount of energy the utility sells.

This is backwards, and makes no sense, but explains perfectly why NorthWestern Energy, instead of wanting to encourage energy efficiency and clean, renewable energy, is looking after its stockholders first and doing exactly the opposite. NorthWestern opposed every net-metering and renewable energy bill proposed in the 2015 legislative session. They are trying to kill the proposed Big Timber Wind Farm. They have asked the Montana Public Service Commission to immediately eliminate their obligation to buy solar electricity and to cut in half the rate they must pay to buy electricity from small-scale solar energy projects. These actions would violate existing laws that have been on the books for almost four decades.

Climate change in Montana is obvious, with melting glaciers, hotter summers, less snow pack, less irrigation water, and longer fire and smoke seasons. According to this week's Economist, published in England, "Montana's rivers are warmer than they should be, which is bad news for trout." Montana's tourism and agriculture are both being threatened.

Using less energy to get the same benefits or producing our own energy, however, threatens NorthWestern Energy's business model, according to which stockholder profits are directly tied to the amount of energy the utility sells.

Maybe it's time we followed the lead of Idaho, Washington, and Oregon, and "decoupled" NorthWestern's profits from the amount of energy they sell. Then they could serve their customers as well as stockholders. Until then, customers should protest loudly to our Public Service Commissioners.

• Jerome Walker, M.D., Missoula

Public utilities should be publicly owned

Missoulian, Aug 12, 2016 lte

NorthWestern Energy is a public utility. It has a protected energy monopoly (except in less populated areas served by co-ops). This monopoly is supposedly balanced by regulation, providing users with reasonable rates and owners a reasonable return. According to NorthWestern Energy's 2015 annual report, \$100 invested on Dec. 31, grew to \$228.51 at the end of 2015. That is way better than the S&P utility index, where \$100 grew to \$168.77, and even better than S&P index as a whole, where the result was \$180.75.

For Montana ratepayers, the results are anything but balanced. In a 2014 article, the Missoulian reported that NorthWestern charged the second-highest rates in the region, at 10.34 cents per kWh while Flathead Electrical Co-op was charging 5.9 cents. Only one other utility was over 10 cents per kWh. These rates play a role in why they are so profitable but are not their greatest abuse of power.

NorthWestern Energy uses their monopoly-derived dollars to lobby against beneficial net metering laws, calling rooftop solar a cancer.

Their vision statement is “enriching lives through a safe, sustainable energy future.” Clearly, “enriching” applies only to their stockholders, as does “sustainable.” Science tells us a “sustainable energy future” means renewables yet NorthWestern Energy uses their monopoly-derived dollars to lobby against beneficial net metering laws, calling rooftop solar a cancer.

NorthWestern Energy is a public utility. It has a protected energy monopoly.

Climate change is a threat to our existence and to our top industries, agriculture and tourism. We are already experiencing reduced snow packs and water supply and longer fire season. A “sustainable energy future” requires a utility that is working for the people of Montana. That will only happen if we own it. Missoula has shown the foresight to take ownership of its water supply. Montanans need to own their energy supply to stop use of our monopoly derived dollars to shout the people down in the legislature.

• John Woodland, Superior

Time to aggressively promote renewables

Missoulian, Aug 24, 2016 lte

I noticed a hopeful sign in Missoula County the other day: a westbound coal train loaded with coal for Asia entering a siding to let an eastbound train carrying new wind turbine components use the main line. There was no way to know where these turbines were headed but we know it wasn't Montana because of the outsize influence NorthWestern Energy's money buys them with the legislature and the Montana Public Service Commission.

As we have come to understand the impact of coal on our climate and our economy, coal is being phased out, a change that must happen if we are to survive. Other states such as Wyoming are racing to become leaders in renewable energy such as wind as costs go down and efficiency, demand and job creation go up. New projects are going elsewhere because the PSC-approved rates NorthWestern is willing to pay for renewable energy sources are too low, and with a monopoly on grid access, there are no alternatives.

NorthWestern charges Montana retail customers some of the highest rates in the Pacific Northwest. Their monopoly ownership of the transmission grid gives them an access veto for Montana renewable

projects. This monopoly is supposedly tempered by legislation and PSC regulation. Northwestern political action committee contributions to three of the five PSC members' campaigns and the efforts of their paid lobbyists make sure they get what they want, hence those high rates and no independent renewable energy projects.

As we have come to understand the impact of coal on our climate and our economy, coal is being phased out, a change that must happen if we are to survive.

We need to end this monopoly now, before the next wave of clean energy production follows that main line right past Montana. I believe the time is now to move aggressively toward renewables. Wind and solar are the future. The state that embraces the future will be rewarded with good-paying jobs and a cleaner environment for all life on the planet.

- Steve McArthur, Missoula

Time for decision-makers to take climate action seriously

*Montana Standard, Sept 12, 2016 op-ed
by Kathy Hadley*

This summer has been a summer of extremes.

The complete closure of the Yellowstone River because of a parasite that left an estimated 10,000 mountain whitefish dead is unprecedented, but not shocking considering the conditions facing our rivers this summer. FWP has acknowledged that record low water flows and high water temperatures exacerbated the parasitic bloom. Unfortunately, this very combination also weakens fish, creating the perfect storm on our world-famous river. While the closure of the Yellowstone has been a major blow to recreation and the economy surrounding it, it is by no means the

only river that has suffered this summer.

June 29th, FWP announced that portions of the Big Hole, and Madison Rivers were under hoot owl restrictions. A few days later closures were added to the Clark Fork, Bitterroot, Blackfoot, Ruby, lower Beaverhead, Jefferson, and lower Gallatin Rivers. The fact that closure began in June is truly shocking. When the FWP Commission first implemented hoot owl closures they were not supposed to be a regular occurrence, and they definitely weren't supposed to start in June. The low flows and high water temperatures that plague our rivers are not random. It

is consistent with the effects of climate change, and representative of what most scientists expect will become the norm in Montana as our snowpack is diminished and runoff happens earlier.

But, it is not just our rivers that are being affected. Wildfire season began full throttle with the Roaring Lion Fire south of Hamilton. This fire burned thousands of acres, cost millions of dollars, and destroyed 16 homes. It was just the beginning. High temperatures, wind, and little moisture means that fires continue to burn across Montana, and unhealthy, smoky air has become the norm in Big Sky Country during the month of August.

Additionally, it was recently announced that nine Montana counties have reached severe drought status and eleven more counties are under drought alert. Lieutenant Governor Mike Cooney, who chairs the Governor's Drought and Water Supply Advisory Committee, has stated that this drought can be attributed to multiple years of low snowpack and early runoff, again consistent with the effects of climate change.

High temperatures, wind, and little moisture means that fires continue to burn across Montana, and unhealthy, smoky air has become the norm in Big Sky Country during the month of August.

Finally, July was recorded as the hottest month on record, not just for July, but for any month dating back to the late 1800's. Considering the first seven months

of 2016 have all been record-breaking as well, it is likely that 2016 will end up being the earth's warmest year on record. This title was currently held by 2014 and then 2015. This summer, and these examples have given us a glimpse into the future of Montana without action on climate change.

These impacts aren't just threatening our outdoor heritage. They also bear an economic cost. Montana's \$6 billion outdoor recreation economy is the second largest economy in the state, and it supports 64,000 jobs. The Montana Wildlife Federation released a report last year that conservatively estimated that if climate change is left unabated, there will be a total loss of \$281 million in earnings, and 11,000 jobs over the next 40 years. This summer has demonstrated to us that these numbers aren't simply a report. Incidents like the Yellowstone fish kill, and the widespread hoot owl closures that have been in effect for the majority of the summer display the real impact climate change is having on people and communities.

Climate change is real, its impacts are being felt, and it's threatening our outdoor heritage. The good news is that Montana is still home to some of the best cold-water fisheries and outdoor recreation in the world. Because of this, it is time for our decision-makers to take climate action seriously. We need to come together and reduce pollution, while investing in clean energy technologies (renewable energy and energy efficiencies) so that Montanans now and into the future can continue to enjoy what makes Montana one of the best places in the world to live and recreate.

- Kathy Hadley lives on a ranch in the Upper Clark Fork River Valley, is a lifelong angler and is president of the Montana Wildlife Federation board of directors.

Writing on the wall

Missoula Independent, Oct. 5, 2016 lte

The writing is on the wall for fossil fuels. Public pressure and market forces have already forced the scheduled closures of two of Colstrip's four coal-powered generators. To prepare for the inevitable closure of the other two generators, NorthWestern Energy has proposed spending \$1.3 billion on 13 new gas generators.

Natural gas is often touted as a "bridge fuel" to clean energy, but the amount of methane—a highly potent greenhouse gas—released during natural gas mining makes it just as bad or worse for the climate than coal. Gas is a bridge to climate disaster, while the cost of clean energy sources like wind and solar have dropped so much that they are competitive with fossil fuels.

And Montana has these clean forms of energy in abundance. Nonetheless, NorthWestern Energy is making it increasingly difficult for clean energy

projects like rooftop solar to be economically viable; at the legislature last year NorthWestern called rooftop solar a "cancer" that must be stopped.

Hundreds of Montanans will be gathering in Butte on Oct. 10 to send a message to NorthWestern that we want an immediate pivot toward renewables.

NorthWestern Energy enjoys a state-sanctioned monopoly. It should serve its customers first, and shareholders second. Please join Montanans from across the state in Butte next Monday to make sure the company remembers this. Visit the 350 Montana web page for more information about the event and the issue.

• Ari LeVaux, Missoula

Montana needs renewables, now

Missoulian, Oct. 23, 2016 lte

About 100 activists gathered in Butte recently to protest NorthWestern Energy's plans to ramp up its gas-powered electricity capacity. Our concern is based on the impacts a warming climate will have on the planet and life as we know it. Natural gas burns more cleanly than coal, but recent studies indicate it may impact the climate as negatively as coal because of methane released by gas mining. With our climate near a tipping point, every dollar spent developing fossil fuels is money spent going in the wrong direction.

NorthWestern plans to spend \$1.3 billion on 13 new gas generators over the next 13 years. In Butte we raised concerns about these generators, but NorthWestern spokesman Butch Larcombe told the Montana Standard his company had no such plans: "Where they're getting the \$1.3 billion or where they're getting the 13, I have no idea."

Assuming Lacombe isn't trying, and failing, to gaslight us, I suggest he consult his company's

Resource Procurement Plan, released in March of this year. Table 1-2 on page five of Chapter 1 ("Plan Overview"), lists 13 gas generators, ranging in output from 18 to 348 megawatts, to come online between 2019 and 2029. On page 7, Table 1-3 outlines the cost of these generators, with a total of \$1.31 billion.

Lacombe also claims NorthWestern has invested over a billion dollars in renewable energy. Apparently true but misleading. Almost 90 percent of that investment was the purchase of existing dams from PPL, which did not add any new renewables to the production mix.

NorthWestern Energy is great at keeping Montana warm and wired for sound. But in addition to the lights turning on, Montanans want straight talk, and long-term vision. We need renewables, now. Because cool rivers, deep snow and green forests are non-negotiable.

• Ari LeVaux, Missoula

Storage is Montana's missing link to renewables

Helena Independent Record, Nov. 6, 2016 lte

NorthWestern Energy (NWE) has proposed spending \$1.3 billion to build 13 gas fired generators over the next decade instead of adding more wind farms and solar panels. They point out that wind and solar are “intermittent” and so may not meet peak demand. Natural gas produces 50 percent less carbon dioxide than coal when burned, but even this plus the methane leaked from natural gas production and distribution will worsen global warming. NWE’s plan is dangerous, expensive, and takes us in the wrong direction.

The solution to intermittent production, whether energy or food, is storage, as even squirrels know. For

energy, “pumped hydro storage” is an already proven, simple and widely used way to store electricity. At Gordon Butte in central Montana there are plans well underway to build such a facility. When wind, water, or sun produce more electricity than needed, that extra electricity will be used to pump water uphill. When more electricity is needed, the water will be allowed to run downhill and turn a generator. Let’s not let NWE bamboozle us into continuing to rely on fossil fuels. Instead, let’s move towards the clean, renewable energy future our state needs.

• Jerome Walker, Missoula

Hedging bets on climate change

Missoulian, Feb. 7, 2017 lte

After retiring and moving to Montana several years ago, I was struck by evidence for climate change — melting glaciers, a longer fire season, big patches of pine beetle kill, streams closed to fishing — scary stuff. Change was much more obvious than in Atlanta, but reminded me of situations I faced practicing medicine there.

Basing diagnoses on scientific evidence often required saying things patients didn’t want to hear. Then I’d suggest getting second opinions. After hearing the same diagnosis and suggested treatment plan, most people would agree to what was proposed — but not everybody. In these cases, rather than arguing, I’d point out that nobody could predict how a given illness would play out, and it wasn’t required to believe everything doctors said. The important thing was to consider the possibility that the diagnosis was correct, and to play it safe by accepting treatment, provided the treatment was not unduly risky. Most folks would agree this was reasonable.

Climate change is like illness; nobody can predict exactly how things will unfold or how bad they will be. A fundamental of medicine is, “First, do no harm.”

For sure, wind, sun and hydropower won’t do harm. Also, unlike a decade ago, renewables are not more expensive and in some cases are cheaper. Since the cost of renewables is based on technology, not limited commodities like gas or coal, they are likely to become less expensive over time, just like cell phones and flat screen televisions.

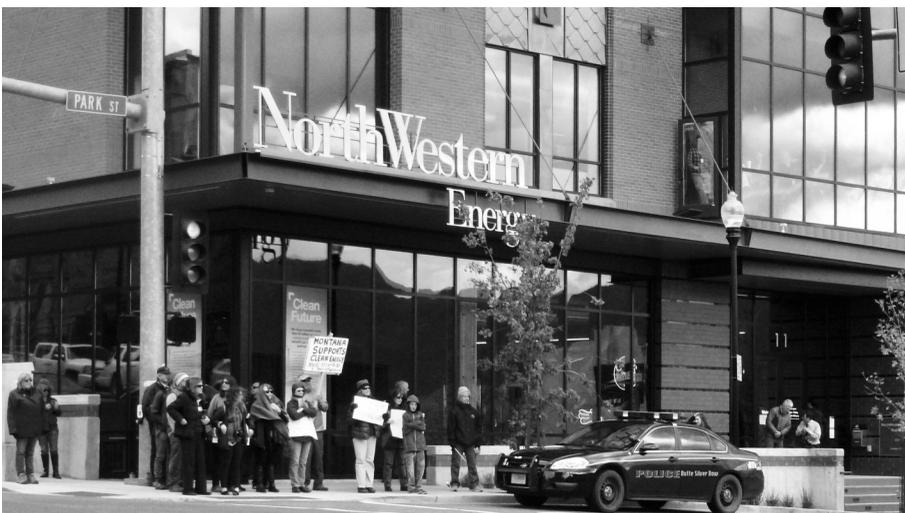
Basing diagnoses on scientific evidence often required saying things patients didn’t want to hear. Then I’d suggest getting second opinions.

So, no matter what our beliefs about how climate change will play out, or whether or not we believe that human activity is to blame, let’s do the conservative, prudent thing, and hedge our bets by choosing the renewable energy path. Results depend on actions, not beliefs.

• Jerome Walker, Missoula

350Montana Visits NorthWestern Energy

On October 10, 2016 a group of climate activists gathered in Butte Montana to demand that NorthWestern Energy change their policy and quickly move electricity generation to 100% renewable energy.



350Montana Visits the PSC

More than 1000 petitions were delivered to the Montana Public Service Commission on Wednesday January 18. Eleven people from 350Montana traveled to Helena in support of the petition to attend the PSC hearing. Five members testified during the public comment period to the PSC. The session was followed by a meeting with lawyers from MEIC and Northwestern Energy.



More action needed, Northwestern

Missoulian, June 4, 2017 lte

NorthWestern Energy (NWE), our monopoly utility, knows that polls show a big majority of Montanans support clean energy resources such as wind, solar and storage technologies. That's why the pamphlets that come with your electric bill give the impression that NWE is greener than Kermit the Frog. NWE's actions, though, suggest a different image — Darth Vader.

First, a little history. When Montana Power went belly-up in 1998, the hydroelectric facilities it owned were bought by Pennsylvania Power and Light (PPL). In November, 2014, NWE purchased these facilities from PPL, giving its' customers the chance to help pay for them twice.

Montana's Renewable Portfolio Standard, passed by the Legislature in 2005, requires public utilities to generate 15 percent of their electricity from new renewable sources. NWE has yet to fully comply with this law, and instead has tried to duck responsibility. In the recent legislative session, the company lobbied for bills that would torpedo rooftop solar, and attacked Community Renewable Energy Projects.

Utilities in states like Wyoming and Iowa, with no better wind than we have in Montana, are receiving billions for investment in wind energy. Meanwhile, NWE is stuck in neutral and slipping towards reverse. Their latest 20-year plan calls for no new wind or solar, only more gas power plants.

We need less talk and lots more action from NWE if our state is to move away from 19th century fossil fuels to a clean energy future.

• Jerome Walker, Missoula

NorthWestern's missed opportunities

Missoulian, June 13, 2017 lte

Thanks to Steve Clawson, NorthWestern Energy's community relations manager, for responding (guest column, June 9) to the June 4 letter titled "More action needed, NorthWestern." However, some history was left out.

Montana Power sold its hydroelectric facilities to Pennsylvania Power and Light in 1998, only to have NorthWestern purchase them back in 2014, causing customers to help pay for facilities twice. While dams provide some clean energy, the whole situation was not ideal for consumers. If Montana Power had seen the future of energy markets more clearly, a lot of money could have been saved.

Today it's NorthWestern that's having trouble seeing

the future. The company's latest 20-year energy procurement plan calls for no new wind or solar and, instead, for 100 percent of new electric generation to come from expensive and risky fossil fuel power plants.

This comes at a time when other utilities around the country are investing in wind and solar because it's so cheap it's saving their customers money. Consider that midwestern Excel Energy, western states' Pacific Corp and Michigan's DTE Energy are doing just that.

Plain and simple: Let's not repeat past mistakes and pay too much for our energy. Wind and solar are the wise economic choice for Montana.

• Harold Hoem, Missoula

Montana solar energy threatened

Missoulian, July 3, 2017 lte

Last week the Montana Public Service Commission issued a ruling that will essentially kill utility-scale solar energy business in Montana. First, the PSC limited solar project contracts to only five years, which eliminates a developer's ability to get financing. Imagine trying to finance your house with a five-year mortgage — the cost would be astronomical if you could even get a loan at all. Then the PSC grossly underestimated the amount of energy solar can produce in Montana, assigning 6 percent “capacity value” when other states around us use 28 percent to 51 percent. This undercuts how much solar projects are paid for energy produced. To add insult to injury, Missoula’s

PSC Commissioner Bob Lake was caught on an open microphone saying he knew full well these changes would kill solar development and voted for them anyway.

This decision is shameless and wrong. Montana will lose out on millions of dollars in investments, hundreds of jobs, and all of the affordable clean energy that would come with these investments as they pull out of Montana and go to other states.

• Marta Meengs, Missoula

PSC, NorthWestern Energy push industry, jobs away

Missoulian, July 5, 2017 op ed

The Public Service Commission and NorthWestern Energy just teamed up to keep Montana in the bottom quarter for per capita income. The PSC rubber stamped NWE’s request to torpedo large-scale solar facilities by setting contract terms so bad that no projects can be built, pushing this growing industry, its jobs and investment dollars to other states. PSC Commissioner Bob Lake was caught on an open microphone admitting his goal was to shut down these projects.

Last year, energy experts testified to the PSC that NorthWestern's proposed value for the solar energy from these facilities was based on production assumptions well below what other states find reasonable and that contract lengths shorter than 15 to 20 years would make financing them almost impossible. Even NorthWestern's own recent request for proposals to build a new power plant required 20 year contracts because it's a standard length for power plants. Instead, the PSC set contracts at 5 years.

Solar energy jobs are growing 12 times as fast as the U.S. economy. Renewables are the fastest growing

energy sector in the country, but Montana will effectively be left out of this growth. Companies seeking to invest in such facilities will take their money and jobs elsewhere, to states like Wyoming, which have embraced renewables. NorthWestern Energy will continue to charge some of the highest utility rates in the Northwest and send their out-of-state stockholders exceptional profits at Montana’s expense. Why? It seems NWE prefers to build the highest priced facilities it can — like gas plants — in order to charge us all more in our bills and give them more profit.

The PSC is harder to understand. Some members, such as the one caught on the open mic, are simply ideologically opposed to renewables. This is both puzzling and concerning given the tremendous job growth solar has created in other parts of the country and the way the decision seemed designed specifically to put an end to solar competing with NorthWestern Energy's monopoly status.

• John Woodland is co-chair of 350Montana

Gazette opinion: Montana PSC clouds solar's future

*Billings Gazette, July 5, 2017 editorial
by Billings Gazette Editorial Board*

The Montana Public Service Commission has cast dark shadows over Montana's solar energy businesses.

For the past year, PSC decisions have been so unfavorable to solar power that these rulings may effectively curtail growth in Montana while solar development soars nationwide.

A conversation inadvertently recorded during a June 22 PSC meeting break indicates that may have been the commission's intention: Commissioner Bob Lake is seen and heard telling a staff analyst that the price the PSC had just set for facilities that are 3 megawatts or smaller was so low it "probably took care of the whole thing."

Asked to comment several days later after the video came to public attention, Lake told The Gazette's Tom Lutey: "We don't have an obligation to assure they make money."

NWE gets its way

However, as Lutey's reporting pointed out, the PSC does have an obligation, under longstanding federal law to promote renewable energy. What the commission did on June 22 was to halve the rate that NorthWestern Energy would pay for energy from small qualifying facilities. The commission also reduced the potential length of those contracts from 25 years to five with the option of a five-year extension.

For the past year, PSC decisions have been so unfavorable to solar power that these rulings may effectively curtail growth in Montana while solar development soars nationwide.



Brad Van Wert, co-owner of Harvest Solar, was contracted to install 191 solar panels on the roof of LP Anderson Tires on Grand Avenue in May.

The PSC cut the incentive price as NWE had asked last summer.

The cost of energy supply is passed on to NWE's Montana customers, so it's important that the costs be fair. However, the new price that would apply to small solar generators is about half of what Montanans already are paying for NWE's own hydropower.

Montana's largest utility succeeded several years ago in getting the PSC to put the costs of buying back Montana dams into its rate base. It will take longer than 10 years to pay off that dam purchase.

After voting to halve the solar rate, Commissioner Tony O'Donnell, of Billings, said the lower rates would force solar companies to operate more like businesses in a free market.

Montana's power market isn't free; it's regulated. NorthWestern is guaranteed monopoly rates that are supposed to deliver reliable, affordable power to customers.

The PSC acted to preserve that monopoly, even as solar power costs have plummeted. The PSC acted to

limit choices for consumers who want to generate their own power for their homes and ranches. The PSC effectively stymied small businesses who sell, install and service solar energy systems.

Billings project at risk

In a separate case, the commission last week set rate and contract limits for a proposed 80-megawatt solar facility that may make it unfeasible. MTSUN, proposed along Alkali Creek Road north of Billings, would generate enough electricity to power about 14,400 homes. The plan is to build on 480 acres of leased state land near an existing high-voltage transmission line that served the Corrette coal-fired plant until it was demolished. The project would pay property taxes estimated to exceed \$1.2 million annually.

The MTSUN decision hasn't yet been finalized. The small solar rule is likely to be challenged by solar

energy advocates. NWE may object as well. The PSC voted to apply the same term limits to all long-term utility supply contracts, including NWE. What's bad for small solar projects may be bad for the state's largest electric utility, too.

The PSC should revisit the small solar rule and its decision on MTSUN.

Simply shutting out solar energy doesn't protect Montana consumers. Diverse sources can add stability and a measure of competition to the energy supply. Coal, solar, wind and hydropower all contribute taxes and jobs to local economies, but not all are feasible everywhere in Montana. Let's give solar an honest chance to work where the sun shines most in our great state.

• Editorial Board

Montana Public Service Commission creates barriers to solar energy

Helena Independent Record, July 20, 2017 op-ed by Bob Raney

In a recent IR guest editorial, Montana Public Service Commission Chairman Brad Johnson touted the Commission's recent decisions that affect Montana electricity customers and made questionable claims about progress toward securing "Montana's clean energy future." But by any credible measure, the Commission's irresponsible decision last month to kill small-scale commercial solar energy development in Montana was a leap backward and will hurt both consumers and future business development in Montana.

On June 22, the Commission voted to slash by 40 percent the amount that our largest utility, NorthWestern Energy, must pay to small-scale, commercial solar power developers. These solar developers put electricity onto the grid so NorthWestern can sell it to us. As Commissioner Bob Lake unknowingly admitted on a live microphone, "Just dropping the rate that much probably took care of the whole thing." But in case the low payments don't "take care of" Montana solar development – in a

Godfather kind of way – the Commission effectively guaranteed that outcome by reducing the maximum contract length for solar projects from 25 years to just five years. In doing so, the Commission eliminated the kind of market certainty that solar developers need to make sound business decisions, which makes securing financing for such projects in Montana all but impossible.

...the Commission's irresponsible decision last month to kill small-scale commercial solar energy development in Montana was a leap backward ...

Consider how the PSC has treated other NorthWestern Energy production sources recently in pricing and contract length: the price for power from various coal sources has ranged from about \$64 to \$67

per megawatt hour, over terms of 30 years or more, from hydro at almost \$60/MWh and 30 years, and from the Judith Gap wind farm at about \$32/MWh and 20 years. And yet, the PSC just set the rate for solar projects at \$20/MWh for 5 years.

This decision of the PSC – a regulatory, not policy-making body – is a clear attempt to discourage solar development, and it goes against long-established federal law. Since the PSC is a quasi-judicial body, this can best be described as “legislating from the bench.” The Public Utilities Regulatory Policies Act is a 39-year-old law that requires states to encourage the development of renewable power when it is cost-competitive with traditional energy resources. The PSC’s decision does the opposite.

The Commission has tried to defend its decision, but in fact, it is a horrible outcome for consumers. Montanans overwhelmingly want clean energy – and not just because it’s far better for our health, water, air and climate. It’s also good for our wallets. Solar energy has never been cheaper. When solar is fairly valued based on real market economics, it is cost-competitive with other, dirty forms of energy. And

because it is independent of volatile natural gas and coal markets, solar’s affordability is reliable into the future.

As NorthWestern Energy customers, we have almost no choice in where our power comes from or how much we pay. We are captive customers of NorthWestern’s monopoly. Because NorthWestern earns greater profit on energy sources it builds and operates itself, it has every incentive to shut out independent producers of power – which is exactly what the PSC’s recent decisions do. We depend on our elected PSC commissioners to ensure that producers of solar and other forms of renewable energy that benefit consumers have a fair opportunity to compete. Consumers demand it and the law requires it.

When it comes to providing Montanans’ access to clean, affordable solar energy, the Public Service Commission has let us down. Our commissioners have an opportunity to reconsider their decision, and if they care about consumers and Montana’s economic future, they should.

- Bob Raney is a former PSC Commissioner and legislator from Livingston.

NorthWestern clings to fossil fuels

Missoulian, August 1, 2017 lte

It is downright amazing seeing NorthWestern Energy still clinging to its desire to build a bunch of fossil fuel gas plants in Montana when we have some of the best wind energy in the country. Here’s what other utilities around the country are saying about wind.

Xcel Energy — which serves millions across the Midwest — recently announced a massive wind expansion because, according to their CEO, Ben Fowke, “You have a unique opportunity to bring wind on that is cheaper as an energy source than fossil alternatives, both natural gas and coal.”

PacifiCorp — which serves Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Oregon — put out an energy plan in April that includes investing in over 1,900 megawatts of wind.

CEO Stefan Bird said, “These investments will significantly increase the amount of clean renewable energy serving customers and reduce costs at the same time.”

MidAmerican Energy of Iowa is planning massive wind investments because it will actually allow the company to freeze rates for the next 12 years. CEO Bill Fehrman said, “The beauty of wind is there’s no fuel costs.”

These are cutting-edge business executives telling it like it is. Why is NorthWestern’s head still stuck in the sand?

- Carla Abrams, Missoula

NorthWestern must earn renewable energy reputation

*Missoulian, July 20, 2017 op-ed
by Brian Fadie*

Ever since the Montana Public Service Commission pulled the rug out from under commercial solar projects in late June, the opinion pages have been on fire with outrage – people wondering how on earth this could have happened. So it was disappointing to see that when NorthWestern Energy responded to the criticism (see the company’s opinion published on July 12), it sought to muddy the water rather than clarify the situation.

Every wind and solar contract signed by NorthWestern Energy since 2013 only happened because the law forced the company to do so.

NorthWestern has indeed signed contracts for wind and solar projects recently, but it only did this because federal law required it to do so. The Public Utilities Regulatory Policy Act is designed to increase the nation’s energy supply and diversity by requiring utilities to purchase cost-competitive electricity from independent power producers. The act is intended to increase competition in energy markets, making monopoly utilities such as NorthWestern compete with other energy companies. This competition and diversification is good for you and me as consumers.

Thanks to advances in technology, electricity generated from wind and solar is cost-competitive in energy markets today. As a result, NorthWestern finds itself competing with renewable energy companies.

This is where its actions become more important than its words.

Every wind and solar contract signed by NorthWestern Energy since 2013 only happened because the law forced the company to do so. NorthWestern fought these kinds of projects hard. It has attacked their contract lengths in the state legislature. It told the Montana Public Service Commission that solar has no value despite all other states in the region — red and blue alike — finding the opposite is true. For NorthWestern to now claim credit for these renewable energy projects that it strongly opposed seems confusing and disingenuous.

Even more confusing is NorthWestern’s claim that it is “look(ing) forward to making additional investments in this arena in the coming years.” Sounds promising, but it is not reflected in the company’s long-term planning document, which calls for absolutely no new wind or solar projects. None. Instead, the plan calls for 13 new expensive and risky gas-fired plants (\$1.3 billion worth to be precise). These are costs and risks that consumers — you and I — would have to bear while NorthWestern’s corporate shareholders reaped all the profits. It is hard to believe these are the actions of a company that is looking forward to investing in renewable energy.

Reasonable people are willing to give credit where credit is due. But until NorthWestern’s actions match its words, then the company would not seem deserving of the pro-renewable energy reputation it seeks.

• Brian Fadie is the Montana Environmental Information Center's Clean Energy Program director.

Guest opinion: Who will watch Montana's utility watchdog?

*Billings Gazette, July 29, 2017 op-ed
by Jan and Harold Hoem*

Every so often questions arise that lead to wondering what our governance is up to.

On June 22, the Montana Public Service Commission set harsh terms for small solar projects in Montana. By federal law, the PSC is required to promote renewable energy. But at their meeting, the PSC cut contract lengths from 25 years to five, with an optional five additional years.

On June 23, Tom Lutey reported in The Billings Gazette and the Missoulian that solar advocates say those shorter contracts are too short to secure financing. Another PSC-negotiated hurdle for small solar energy projects with power for up to 540 homes (known as Qualifying Facilities, QFs) was a 40 percent cut in the rates that utilities like North Western Energy would pay for adding solar energy to their grid.

“Hot mic records troubling conversation about solar regulations” read the title of a follow-up Lutey article appearing in the Missoulian. It covers PSC Commissioner Bob Lake and PSC rate analyst Neil Templeton, accidentally recorded during a break.

Lake acknowledged that cuts to rates and contracts offered to QFs are likely deep enough to kill future development. Templeton added that the rates are too low and the contract lengths, too short: “Just dropping the rate that much probably took care of the whole thing.”

“Well,” replied Lake, “the 10-year might do it if the price doesn’t. And at this low price, I can’t imagine anyone getting into it. So it becomes a totally moot point because dropping the rate... probably took care of the whole thing.” Oops.

The PSC, in a release June 23, quotes Commissioner Roger Koopman saying, “It’s not the role of the commission ... to pick favorites in the energy field. It is our job to maintain a level playing field that is fair to both the ratepayer and energy entrepreneurs.” Koopman elsewhere said he followed the recommendations of the Montana Consumer Counsel,

and that the MCC is “unafraid of sometimes testing the limits of troublesome federal mandates.”

After nearly 5,000 miles driving and some 1,200 hours production time, Jan and Harold Hoem have made a 33-minute film that supporters of the project say gets to the heart of questions surrounding development of an Otter Creek coal mine and the Tongue River railroad in Montana.

The PSC had previously obliged NorthWestern Energy (NWE) by suspending the small solar project incentive program in 2016. After objections from solar advocates, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission ruled that PSC was in the wrong.

Under the new rules, QFs are unlikely to get financing with shortened contract length and uncertainty of prices. Is the PSC really being fair to fledgling solar entrepreneurs? Is this really a level playing field?

The Billing Gazette’s July 5 opinion piece says it best: “The Montana Public Service Commission has cast a dark shadow over Montana’s solar energy business. For the past year, PSC decisions have been so unfavorable to solar power that these rulings may effectively curtail growth in Montana while solar development soars nationwide. Simply shutting out solar energy doesn’t protect Montana consumers. Diverse sources can add stability and a measure of competition to the energy supply. Coal, solar, wind and hydropower all contribute taxes and jobs to local economies, but not all are feasible everywhere in Montana.”

Nationally, handicapping solar start-ups is actively supported by the Koch brothers and the American

Legislative Exchange Council, the organization they back with bucks.

Consumers want renewable power sources. NWE acknowledges this. What better way to cool homes during ever hotter summers than by using the sun's own power that provides its own fuel — no expensive and risky pipelines or mines! And the cost to other ratepayers is minimal, considering the consequences

of a hotter climate.

Meanwhile, who will watch the watchers? It looks like, in Montana, an alert press and public are the most reliable defenders. Kudos to the Gazette and others for their watchful eyes.

- Harold and Jan Hoem of Missoula are members of Montana Elders for a Livable Tomorrow.

Guest opinion: NorthWestern's bad bets cost Montana consumers

*Billings Gazette, Aug. 8 2017 op-ed
by Travis Kavulla*

NorthWestern Energy's recent statements likening my colleagues to "children in need of discipline by a parent" took me aback. This rhetoric is unprofessional and incorrect.

NorthWestern is unhappy with a series of recent PSC decisions. Specifically, the PSC has determined that unless a new power plant can demonstrate benefits to consumers within 10 years, it should not be pre-approved by the PSC.

NorthWestern is a legal monopoly. It is allowed to charge customers rates based on whatever it spends, so long as the PSC signs off before it buys a power plant. Whether the investment turns out to be a good bet or a bad bet does not matter to NorthWestern's bottom line. It gets paid either way.

Most companies have to shoulder the risk of an investment. Meanwhile, NorthWestern has been gambling with other people's money, taking big risks over the last decade that most businesses would not. Buying existing hydro and coal assets at a substantial premium, NorthWestern bet that electricity prices would rise and the assets will be "in the money."

Unfortunately, those bets haven't paid off, and it's increasingly clear that some of them never will. Customers have paid slightly more than \$460 million in just the past five years in premiums over and above the market price of energy for the coal, hydro, and wind power plants the company owns.

Put another way, if NorthWestern had instead bought energy from other suppliers — the independently owned share of Colstrip or excess supply from wind farms — every NorthWestern customer would have saved on average \$1,250.

For years, I have been a critic of NorthWestern's approach. The company's strategy does not make sense, except in the context of a company that earns a profit based on whatever it spends, not what value this spending brings to consumers.

That's a substantial amount of disposable income — and what has that money gone towards?

That money has produced little new investment and jobs in Montana, because it has mostly been used to grease the movement of existing assets from one company to another. Indeed, some of the same investors are the largest shareholders of the prior owner of the utility's dams and NorthWestern itself. That \$460 million isn't an investment so much as a wealth transfer from Montanans to out-of-state investors.

NorthWestern argues its bets are a type of insurance policy. Maybe. But consider your own experience.

Would you promise to pay, right now, \$7 per gallon each time you fill your tank for the next two decades? You'd be paying double today's price, but you'd be insured in the event that gas leapt to \$15 per gallon.

I would not take that bet. If I did, I'd leave myself a little wiggle room. NorthWestern is taking the opposite approach, wanting to lock in prices for virtually all its supply. As a consequence, NorthWestern rates are today among the highest of its peers in the region.

NorthWestern is a legal monopoly. It is allowed to charge customers rates based on whatever it spends, so long as the PSC signs off before it buys a power plant. Whether the investment turns out to be a good bet or a bad bet does not matter to NorthWestern's bottom line. It gets paid either way.

For years, I have been a critic of NorthWestern's approach. The company's strategy does not make sense, except in the context of a company that earns a profit based on whatever it spends, not what value this spending brings to consumers.

My colleagues today on the PSC "get it." They see the risk that consumers have faced because of past

decisions that fail to hold the company accountable. My colleagues and I are taking a cautious approach to further out-of-market investments.

NorthWestern has suggested the PSC is trying to bring back the days of deregulation. That is nonsense. Back then, Montana customers were totally exposed to the market. Today, NorthWestern has long-term arrangements equal to more than half its consumers' demand. The question now is whether NorthWestern will make further "long" bets on the remaining supply.

NorthWestern's bad-mouthing of the PSC marks a change in company strategy. Rather than convince us, the monopoly is lobbying legislators to apply political pressure to us. This is inappropriate. The PSC is bound by a code of ethics and Montana law to consider only evidence that is presented to us under oath in our hearing room. NorthWestern knows this. The utility damages its credibility by stooping to this level, and puts itself in a class with the Anaconda Company and Enron.

I urge NorthWestern to make its case before the PSC. Keep it to the facts. Avoid the scare tactics. We can have an informed dialogue about Montana's energy future without making rushed decisions that consumers will end up regretting.

- Travis Kavulla, R-Great Falls, is the vice chairman of the Montana Public Service Commission.

About 350Montana

Our Mission

350Montana works to reduce atmospheric CO₂ concentrations to 350 ppm by implementing strategic actions and advocating policies to end fossil fuel burning with the greatest urgency. We envision a rapid conversion to a 100% renewable global energy system using wind, water, and solar. We work with the global grassroots climate movement to achieve these goals and safeguard Earth's life-support systems.

Guiding Principles

We accept the scientific consensus that most known fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground for safe levels of atmospheric carbon to be achieved.

We conclude that electoral politics as currently practiced in the United States will not result in timely, effective solutions to the challenges of global climate change.

We believe that grass roots demands for effective policies will be required to shift the balance of political power and enable the US to respond effectively to climate change challenges.

We view these challenges as issues of social justice where short-term economic gain and retention of political power threaten the long-term well-being of all Earth's inhabitants.

Strategic Vision

We model our campaigns on precedents that have extended civil rights to the oppressed and believe that a growing wave of grass-roots protest is required to shift the political power in favor of our common interests.

We promote, support and engage in nonviolent demonstrations that may include civil disobedience when and where such tactics will be productive. Our actions are designed to:

- Oppose and resist the extraction, shipment and burning of fossil fuels,
- Increase the political costs of decisions that promote burning fossil fuels and
- Promote policies that support returning to safe levels of atmospheric carbon.

We work cooperatively with other organizations committed to finding effective solutions to climate change challenges. We believe that a diversity of complimentary approaches will be required to institute effective policies.

350Montana is powerfully positioned to play key roles in meeting climate change challenges. Montana lies at Ground Zero for new fossil fuel extraction and export and 350Montana contributes uniquely to statewide politics. Our grass-roots, activist volunteers use this position to address the moral imperatives of global climate change.



350 Montana's Top 13 Local Things You Can Do

1. Sign both petitions 350 MONTANA is promoting. One encourages more clean energy, the other encourages Governor Bullock to stay with the goals of the Paris Climate Accords.
2. Help 350 MONTANA get signatures on these petitions at the Farmers Markets and other events.
3. Join 350 MONTANA's "Action Committee," which meets every third Monday at Imagine Nation Brewery at 5:30 p.m. This is the committee that plans local actions to halt climate change.
4. Learn about NorthWestern Energy (NWE) and its plan to spend \$1.3 billion on a new generation of fossil fuel plants.
5. Help by supporting 350 MONTANA's NWE campaign, which includes publishing two reports and an educational tour of five Montana cities this fall. It's high time we break free from fossil fuels.
6. Write a note to Bob Rowe, CEO of NorthWestern Energy, to enclose with your next check. Tell him why you support transitioning now to wind and solar energy.
7. Email our elected officials and tell them to support Senator Merkley's 100-by-50 bill, which would transition our power grid to clean energy by 2050. (<https://www.merkley.senate.gov/100by50>)
8. Help 350 MONTANA, Climate Smart, and other groups get a second round of the "Solarize Missoula" campaign going.
9. Help 350 MONTANA establish a task force to explore what Mayor John Engen's pledge to stay with the Paris Accords means in real terms. Will Missoula go 100 percent renewable?
10. Help 350 MONTANA support Leonard Higgins, who stands trial in Fort Benton, Montana, Oct. 4 for shutting off a tar sands pipeline.
11. Use your creativity! Write, blog, photograph for us, improve our web presence, our social media outreach, and make us smile!
12. Invite someone from 350 MONTANA's leadership team to come speak about Montana's changing climate to your group or organization, your scout troop or school assembly. We'll bring Al Gore's slides and graphs.
13. Donate to 350 MONTANA to propel us forward. We are sponsored by the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center. So write your check to JRPC/ 350 MONTANA and send it to the address below.

