

# [***Utilities Can Meet Growing Power Demand Without Fossil Fuels | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BNF-3PJ1-JBR6-90MC-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Several of America's utilities are warning that red lights are flashing across America's power grids. They claim surging demand will crash America's electric infrastructure without increased reliance on fossil fuels.

They're right about two things: Electricity demand is growing in America, between mining for cryptocurrencies, booming artificial intelligence, more people choosing electric vehicles and appliances, and the manufacturing renaissance President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) has created. They're also right that electricity—even with surging demand—must be reliable and affordable.

But they're wrong to say building new natural gas plants and keeping old coal plants online is the best way to meet new demand.

Yet that message keeps showing up in [*media*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/03/07/ai-data-centers-power/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=wp_climatecoach&wpisrc=nl_climatecoach) [*coverage*](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/13/climate/electric-power-climate-change.html) and [*conversations*](https://www.newsdata.com/california_energy_markets/bottom_lines/bryce-ruffles-feathers-with-naruc-keynote-slamming-renewables-policies/article_fb6cbe28-d789-11ee-8a5b-63b851e11851.html) with our nation's top policymakers: Never mind our kids' health. Forget economic opportunity generated by powering America's manufacturing resurgence creating even more good jobs building new power plants here in America. Ignore that clean energy is [*cheaper than fossil fuels*](https://energyinnovation.org/publication/the-coal-cost-crossover-3-0/).

Electricity demand is rising, utilities say, so we must turn backward to fossil fuel-powered coal and gas plants, industry says. The clean energy future must wait. People worried about extreme weather—unusually strong winter storms, rampant wildfires, or brutal droughts—just need to give us a few more years.

This is a ruse. We've heard this refrain before and squandered prior clean energy opportunities. The answer from industry is always "Not Now" or "Too Risky."

Sure, it's complicated to build and run reliable power systems based on local renewables, distributed energy storage, and smart resources like electric vehicles, but states as different as Texas and California show it works.

Yes, building a clean, resilient grid requires investment—but it pays dividends. Every dollar invested in clean energy by the federal government through the Inflation Reduction Act has [*spurred $5.47 in private-sector investment*](https://rhg.com/research/clean-investment-monitor-q4-2023-update/), worth nearly a quarter-trillion in just one year.

Choosing last century's technologies threatens American leadership and economic prosperity. For the first time in decades, we're seeing vigorous growth in manufacturing in this country, this time with [*clean technology to power those factories*](https://www.latitudemedia.com/news/solving-climates-industrial-sized-problem-requires-electrification). American families are choosing electric vehicles and appliances [*at record rates*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/21/climate/inflation-reduction-act-progress-climate.html).

We must build more power plants to meet this moment and building clean ones (for example, solar and wind powered plants and battery storage facilities) will create jobs for workers and prosperity for communities across the country. The same trend is apparent worldwide, and if we lead the way building clean energy, American utilities can tap a generational opportunity.

So why then are utilities ignoring that clean energy is cheaper and better for our lungs?

Because growth in electricity demand has been flat since the mid-2000s, the spike in demand today might seem daunting. But America rose to the challenge of even steeper rises in demand in past decades. Why can't we do that again?

[*It's simply no longer true*](https://rmi.org/insight/headwinds-for-us-gas-power/) that we need fossil fuels to meet growing energy demand. Clean-energy technologies that are as effective and cheaper than fossil fuel-burning facilities are already available. Defaulting to gas or coal is outdated and ignores affordable solutions like increasing efficiency, renewable energy sources like solar or wind, and batteries.

Earlier this year, Minnesota's Xcel Energy [*shut down a coal unit*](https://stories.xcelenergy.com/ArticlePage/?id=Xcel-Energy-retires-first-coal-unit-at-Sherco#:~:text=Clean%20energy%20investments%20at%20Sherco&text=Once%20complete%2C%20the%20combined%20710,31.) and replaced it with a combination of solar, storage, and transmission lines. In Australia, rooftop solar is the single-largest resource coming online as coal retires. In Ireland and the United Kingdom, utilities are proving grids work reliably and more efficiently through a combination of renewables, storage, and distributed resources, such as rooftop solar and residential batteries.

Texas and North Dakota, states with a long history of oil production and conservative-leaning ***politics*** where electricity growth dwarfs national projections (25 percent and 60 percent, respectively), are leading clean-energy adoption. And in [*2022*](https://cleanpower.org/news/market-report-2022/), Iowa and South Dakota each generated more than 50 percent of their electricity from clean power.

"It is simply not correct to think increased fossil generation is necessary to address the demand growth created by the energy transition," grid expert Audrey Zibelman told me. "At this point we have enough global experience to know there is no technical reason why we need new fossil fuel to meet the forecasted electric demand growth."

In about a month, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will finalize rules that further limit emissions from coal and natural gas power plants. That shift will cost utilities money if they decide to expand their use of fossil fuel-burning facilities in the form of pollution-control equipment.

So why are some utilities hemming and hawing about the switch to clean energy, sounding alarms? It could be that many of the current utility leaders were not in their roles during prior periods of high electricity demand growth and are thus not used to leading in periods of high growth. Also, the switch to clean power requires operating the grid in new and different ways, and some utilities have more experience with this than others.

But there is plenty of experience to draw from. If utility executives are nervous, instead of delaying progress they should talk with peers across the U.S. and globe who are making the clean energy transition and ask, "so how do we do this?"

There's no reason state and federal policymakers should fall for the latest "not now" protests from utilities about switching to clean technologies. Now, more than ever, regulators should ask utilities hard questions and not take their arguments at face value.

We must spur American prosperity while protecting ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren from the escalating climate crisis. Anything else is simply not an option.

*Sonia Aggarwal is the CEO of Energy Innovation and served as Special Assistant to the President for Climate Policy, Innovation, and Deployment in the Biden administration, where she helped to develop the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2369709/growing-power.jpg)

**Graphic**

Growing Power

Brandon Bell/Getty Images

Aerial view of the Oberon Solar O&M farm on March 24, in Ector County, Texas.

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