

NORTHWEST POWER PLAN INCLUDES FEWER FOSSIL FUEL PLANTS, MORE CONSERVATION

By Rob Chaney

Proposals to forego future fossil fuel power plants and wring more conservation savings out of the Pacific Northwest electricity market pleased many attendees at Tuesday night's Northwest Power and Conservation Council public hearing in Missoula.

But local electricity utility managers worried that the council's draft electricity plan for the next five years set unreasonable conservation targets and failed to consider Montana's rural nature. Unlike the industrial power users of Oregon and Washington's Interstate 5 corridor, most Montana utilities serve residential customers who can't make large-scale reductions in their power use.

The two-hour hearing was one of several that council members offered in the four-state area. They are gathering feedback for the Northwest 6th Power Plan, which governs electricity generated from Columbia River Basin. It also controls fish and wildlife improvement programs in areas affected by the river basin dams and power plants. Public comment on the draft plan is open until Nov. 6.

The draft calls for more renewable energy generation from sources such as wind and solar. It would try to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by restraining coal-fired electricity. Coal contributes 20 percent of the region's electricity but emits 85 percent of its greenhouse gas. And it foresees more dependence on natural gas to offset those coal reductions.

A common theme among the two-dozen speakers was that the plan didn't go far enough to spur energy efficiency and eliminate coal power production. University of Montana student Zack Porter spoke for about 20 fellow students in the audience when he called for not stabilizing carbon emissions but reversing their growth.

"None of us in this room will feel the impact of climate change that our children will experience," Porter said.

Ravalli Electric Co-op customer Larry Keogh said we've ignored the cost of the carbon dioxide we pump into the air, but can't continue to do so.

"If I had to pay my carbon costs, I'd howl," Keogh told the council members. "But sometimes you've got to nut up and do what's right. We need to scale back our carbon footprint, regardless of the cost."

Ravalli Electric member services manager Jim Maunder observed that his residential customers were struggling because Montana tends to be behind the trend in energy efficiency and building code enforcement. Co-op board member Bob Bailey added the power plan didn't give enough consideration to nuclear energy in its mix.

Other comments included removing the remaining Snake River hydropower dams to restore salmon fishing, concern over Canadian coal development plans on the North Fork of the Flathead River, a need for better incentives for solar energy production, and more nimble development of energy efficiency programs.

"This plan gives guidance to the (Montana) Public Service Commission," said PSC member Gail Gutsche. "We need you folks to lead, and we will help guide our utilities through your leadership."