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COMMENTS ON IDAHO POWER'S FUTURE RESOURSE PLANS

Idaho Power has recently announced future plans concerning its generating capacity, lightly touching on photovaltaic and wind generation as "unreliable". A poor choice of words in my opinion. While true they are not able to meet a surge in demand like a coal fired or natural gas fired plant, studies have shown wind and sun power electrical production to be remarkably consistant overall year to year. The saying "as sure as the sun will rise in the morning" comes to mind. Idaho Power does plan a 350 megawatt wind farm but solar power was left completely out of the picture.

Specifically, residential grid tied solar power, which involves individual homeowners installing PV modules, along with the appropiate UL approved grid tie inverter and switching gear, right at the site where the power will be consumed. The beauty of this arrangement is that the power is produced at the peak demand times of the day. There are also no lines losses as compared to a remote central generatoring facility sending the power over hundreds of miles of transmission lines, which when finally reaching the delivery point less then half of the wattage generated is available for use. In times of excess production by the homebased PV powerplant, as relative to the homes consumption, the power is sent directly into the grid (turning the meter backwards) to be used down the line by others. In effect the grid is used as a giant battery to temporarily store the excess power, when the PV system is not meeting the homes load the grid is available to make up the difference. The homeowner benefits from a reduced monthly power bill, the utility benefits from reduced peak loads, and we all benefit by reducing the load on coal and natural gas fired generating plants that nobody wants in their backyards, along with their attendant transmission lines.

California has led the nation in grid tied solar installations, while I do not have the exact figures the total power produced in this fashion is in the megawatts and growing day by day. A progressive package of tax credits and purchase rebates sponsered by the state and federal govenments along with the utilities has made these systems cost effective while at the same time reducing the need for more and more conventional power plants. Japan and Germany lead the world in grid tied solar systems, 39 and 27 % respectively of the worlds PV module production goes to those countries. Germany also has the distinction of having the worlds largest installed wind production capability, no dummies they. Idaho has a handfull of grid tied systems to date, along with a few small grid tied wind turbines which perform in the same manner as the grid tied solar systems. While the needed equipment is expensive ($10.00 a watt for an installed system is used as a rough guide) it is very reliable, will produce power pollution free for decades with no required maintenance, and can be a risk free investment for the homeowner while providing hard to quantify satisfaction that they are doing "something" about their power bill in a fashion that society as a whole will benefit from.

In short, I'd like Idaho Power and the state to encourage home based power production as a way to reduce the peak power loads on conventional power plants. This encouragement could take several avenues, production tax credits, eliminating sales tax on renewable energy equipment, and greater investment tax credits on the costs of the equipment. All of this amounts to a subsidy: what, you don't think the coal and gas industry are goverment subisidized? Like them, renewable energy production is worth subsidizing, perhaps more so for its lack of environmental degradation and its reliabilty. Far from being unreliable, wind and solar power, like abstinence, works every time its tried.

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