THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Viewpoints: Collaboration delivers renewable energy

By Michael Peevey, Mary D. Nichols and Robert Weisenmiller
Special to The Bee
By Michael Peevey, Mary D. Nichols and Robert Weisenmiller
Last modified: 2012-12-26T17:00:13Z
Published: Friday, Dec. 21, 2012 - 12:00 am | Page 19A
Last Modified: Wednesday, Dec. 26, 2012 - 9:00 am

Copyright 2013 . All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

California is in the midst of transforming its century-old electric grid into a modern system to unlock the opportunity of a 21st century economy and fight off the worst effects of global warming.

Devastating and recurring impacts of drought, flood and hurricane – costing more than $120 billion in the United States over the last two years – foretell of the swelling costs of climate change. They highlight the need to both reduce emissions immediately, to avoid the worst of the impacts, but also invest to make our economy, infrastructure and natural habitats resilient against inevitable impacts.

Strengthening the electricity grid is central to meeting that challenge, and doing so requires dramatically reducing emissions from generation and making significant upgrades to Korean War-era infrastructure.

We need renewable power, and we need new transformers, wires and communications capabilities so that disruptions on the grid can be immediately identified and fixed. These investments will make our grid more reliable today and allow the clean, increasingly resilient grid of the future to evolve.

Recent studies, including a report by the Little Hoover Commission, recognize these challenges facing the electricity industry. But they diminish them by preferring a limited and shortsighted perspective and give short shrift to the extensive collaboration now in place across state, local

and federal agencies, and the remarkable progress we are making as we advance energy, economic and environmental goals.

The state has prioritized energy efficiency to reduce consumer costs and improve economic productivity among California businesses. California's efficiency standards have contributed to saving ratepayers $66 billion since 1978 and will save another estimated $60 billion by 2020.

The next priority is clean energy. Three years ago, critics claimed it was too hard to permit renewable energy in California. Today, the capacity for more than 11,000 megawatts of renewable power – the equivalent of 22 gas-fired power plants – is in place, and more is on the way.

Driving this influx of renewable energy in California is a wholehearted commitment to collaboration. For example, just a few years ago, wind generation could not be developed in the wind-heavy Tehachapi Mountains because of inadequate transmission. State agencies teamed up to fast-track the necessary upgrades. Today, thousands of megawatts of clean power are flowing from the Tehachapi turbines, with thousands more in the pipeline.

The new era of collaboration also ensures that environmental protections and reviews are accomplished quickly and effectively. For example, the recent release of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan – a groundbreaking seven-county plan to preserve habitat for species while accelerating renewable project development in the resource-rich desert – involved extensive collaboration among numerous state and federal agencies, along with counties, private developers and environmental advocates.

Similar cooperation allowed the state to effectively manage the outage of the giant San Onofre nuclear plant this year and avoid power shortages in the hot summer months. The joint effort included bringing replacement power on line with help from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the South Coast Air Quality Management District and advancing the in-service date for the Sunrise transmission line with help from the U.S. Forest Service. Caltrans helped speed up a transmission upgrade in southern Orange County, and a statewide conservation program was put in place with help from the state's utilities.

We recognize that more needs to be done, and it is. In the coming year, our agencies will double down on our cooperative efforts and align a number of planning activities that will outline, with unprecedented transparency, how California is comprehensively addressing climate change.

Today, more than a quarter of the electricity powering California is pollution-free (not including nuclear generation), and many of California's most polluting fossil fuel power plants have been retired and replaced by new, cleaner generation plants and energy efficiency. Rooftop solar is

becoming an important source of power in many parts of the state; planning is under way to effectively integrate plug-in electric vehicles into a modern grid, and new policies that will allow customers to further control energy use and costs are in the works.

These coordinated efforts and investments have resulted in thousands of new jobs and will help meet the climate challenge while enabling future growth. A clean, modern power grid is achievable at reasonable cost. California will lead the way.