

Education is everything

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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Education is important, but factual education is crucial. Having an opinion is good, but it is far more effective if facts support that opinion. We live in a fast paced world that gives little time for processing and validating claims. Therefore, investing time in seeking facts to form our opinions is time well spent. By doing this we can be assured that our perspective is based on fact not emotion.

A trademark saying in the real estate industry is “location, location, location.” Perhaps education, education, education would be an appropriate saying for the electric utility industry. Today it seems popular vote, and emotion drive opinion rather than facts. These opinions are flooded to us instantaneously on a daily basis through email, texting, twitter, Facebook, or whatever social media communication we choose to follow.

Recently I have heard radio advertisements urging Nebraska’s Public Power Utilities to “get in the game,” by shutting down NPPD’s coal plants and stop importing “dirty coal from Illinois.” An educated response to this claim is that NPPD does not import coal from Illinois, it all comes from the Powder River Basin in Wyoming where the cleanest coal in the nation comes from.

Another fact about coal fired generation that is widely misunderstood is that coal itself does not generate electricity. The coal is burned to heat water and create steam, the steam is forced over a turbine that turns a generator. After the steam passes over the turbine it is condensed back into water and recycled. The white “smoke” often observed at a stack during colder temperatures is water vapor in the form of steam that is lost in the cooling process, not smoke as popular vote would indicate.

So what about all the claims that wind energy is the least expensive option? Here is a factual side of the story about wind energy that is never told. Believe it or not generating electricity with

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wind turbines is not a new concept. Long before the days of REA, rural houses and barns had small wind turbines affixed to them. So why did it not make sense to develop the national grid based on wind energy then? Largely for the same reasons today, pure and simple economics. Wind energy can only be used in conjunction with a conventional power plant running at the same time. By serving Nebraska's customers with a wind farm, requires that a fossil fueled power plant must also be running because obviously wind doesn't blow 100 percent of the time. Therefore, serving one customer with the burden of two power plants instead of one. Nebraska's energy industry is fully aware of the apparent wind resource we have in the state. We also know that if we replace conventional plants with wind or solar, the low rates we enjoy in Nebraska will not just go up a little they will become unaffordable.

Natural gas is at record low prices today. Why can't we replace the nation's coal plants with natural gas? That is the very problem...today prices are low but not long ago, prices were high. Electricity prices follow the markets and natural gas is much more volatile than coal. Another way to relate is; low fuel cost, low electricity cost, high fuel cost, and high electricity cost. Recently a formal study of coal contracts was presented to NPPD's board and revealed that Gentlemen Station enjoys the lowest delivered fuel cost of any coal plant in the world.

Is then the need for education limited to the subject of coal versus wind? Absolutely not. Public Power sponsors many educational efforts to reinforce what we are about. Education isn't only about gathering informed facts, education is also aimed as safety and telling our story.

The Nebraska Rural Electric Association hosts a Youth Energy Camp annually, so the coming generations can experience how Nebraska's generation plants work, see a real-live high voltage safety demonstration, and many other lessons about public power. This is done in a summer camp setting at the Nebraska National Forest at Halsey in a fun, but educational environment.

Individual public power districts also conduct several safety demonstrations across the state in an effort to educate our ratepayers on what to do in an emergency such as a downed line or other hazards. Districts also inform ratepayers how to save money by communicating energy efficient tips and practices.

I would encourage you to invest time to gather facts on which to base your conclusions. Your local public power district would be a great place to ask for information. They have very knowledgeable people who will be glad to answer your questions.

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