

In The News:

By Carol Browner



The Indian Point nuclear power plant's containment silos rise above the skyline along the Hudson River in Buchanan, N.Y. Photo: AP

This month, thought leaders and innovators from across the energy sector convened for New York Energy Week. The timing couldn't have been better: Only a few weeks ago, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed new carbon-pollution standards for fossil-fuel power plants.

As the health and economic impact of dangerous greenhouse gases and carbon pollution becomes ever clearer, the need for carbon-free electricity sources has become more imperative. The good news is that New York already has viable clean-energy sources on which to build, including wind, solar, other renewables and nuclear power.

These sources are a down payment on achieving the state's carbon-pollution reduction targets. Existing nuclear power, in particular, is a key source for New York — and it must continue to play a large role in the state's carbon-free-energy production.

Ten years ago our energy mix looked very different. In 2004, coal made up 49 percent of America's net electricity generation, while renewables made up less than 1 percent. Today, coal generation is down 10 percent, and carbon-free sources, including nuclear, make up more than 25 percent of electricity generation.

According to Deutsche Bank, wind and solar energy alone are projected to experience significant growth and to provide 17 percent of electricity generation by 2030. In Iowa, already they are generating nearly 30 percent of their energy from wind technology.

In proposing its Clean Power Plan recently, the EPA thoughtfully took into account the reality of our current electricity sources, including existing nuclear power and renewables. It recognized what states have already done to reduce greenhouse gases and carbon pollution through renewable portfolio standards and energy-efficiency initiatives.

States, including New York, now have the opportunity to build on what they have accomplished, and the industry has an incentive to develop innovative solutions to generate cleaner, safer energy.

Important to securing the most cost-effective carbon reductions will be preserving existing carbon-free sources, such as nuclear.

In this state, existing nuclear-power plants provide about a third of the electricity. That includes roughly 25 percent of the electric power for the city and Westchester region from the Indian Point nuclear plant. The preservation of New York power plants is critical to the state's ability to produce energy while limiting carbon pollution.

As a former EPA administrator, I know the value of carbon-free nuclear energy. I have long championed the need to limit the dangerous pollutants that contribute to climate change, and I know what an important role nuclear energy plays in helping to accomplish this.

Consider: The use of energy from nuclear-power plants across the country avoids almost 600 million metric tons of carbon pollution a year. To avoid that much carbon pollution from cars would require removing more than 100 million cars from the road. In New York in 2013, the state's six nuclear power plants prevented more than 22 million metric tons of carbon pollution.

Nuclear is also an important part of maintaining reliability. Last January, during the Polar Vortex, nuclear energy had the highest capacity factor of any other source of energy, operating at a 95 percent capacity rate. That kept families warm and the lights on during that extreme weather.

I hope New York Energy Week provided the opportunity for all stakeholders to begin the important work of crafting a plan in response to the EPA's proposal — a plan that recognizes the reality of the carbon-free energy sources that already are part of New York's electricity model: efficiency, renewables and nuclear.

Bottom line: The EPA has set reasonable goals, and New York is poised to move forward. But that will mean expanding renewable energy, improving energy efficiency and maintaining existing nuclear power as part of the state's energy mix.

Carol Browner, former Environmental Protection Agency administrator, is a member of the Leadership Council of Nuclear Matters, a campaign to raise awareness about the need to preserve existing nuclear energy plants.

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