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Texas' Blackouts Blew In on the Wind

The grid nearly failed because of an energy mix weighted toward unreliable sources of power.

By Wayne Christian

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Frozen utility lines amid a winter storm that caused blackouts in Austin, Texas, Feb. 17.

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People once set aside their political differences after a natural disaster struck. They would unite to help those suffering and ensure everyone who needed help got it. Texans did this 3½ years ago after Hurricane Harvey. Millions came together to help their neighbors and, in many cases, complete strangers.

Unfortunately, times have changed. Political outrage seems to be the new rule in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Rather than trusting the science and data, environmental opportunists have used the tragedy of February's Winter Storm Uri, which plunged much of the American South into a treacherous deep freeze, as a weapon in their never-ending war against fossil fuels. They simply refuse to believe that during the storm electricity

generated from wind and solar decreased 52% while the electricity generated from natural gas increased 72%.

Regardless of your thoughts on climate change, last month's storm made painfully clear that climate catastrophists have an oversized influence on public policy. An obsessive focus on reaching the unattainable goal of zero carbon emissions led to decades of poor decisions that prioritized and subsidized unreliable energy sources (wind and solar) at the expense of reliable ones (natural gas, coal and nuclear). Texans now know that reliable energy is essential to our everyday lives.

The catastrophists' oversized influence has produced a dangerous hypocrisy. Greens say that wind and solar can replace natural gas and coal to meet our energy needs while reducing carbon emissions. But when "renewables" fail, greens claim they aren't to blame. "Wind power was expected to make up only a fraction of what the state planned for during the winter," according to the Texas Tribune. Which is it?

Ratepayers and taxpayers don't have unlimited funds to invest in energy infrastructure. One choice always comes at the expense of another. The problem with wind and solar power is that investment in unreliable renewable sources has displaced investment in electricity generation from reliable energy sources. Worse, these investment decisions weren't made voluntarily by individuals in the free market. They were forced on Texans by politicians in Washington.

According to the nonprofit Texas Public Policy Foundation, for every 39 cents the oil-and-gas industry received in federal taxpayer subsidies from 2010 to 2019, the wind industry received \$18.86, 48 times as much, and the solar industry received \$82.46, 211 times as much. By 2029 Texans will have spent \$2.5 billion subsidizing wind and solar farms through local property-tax abatements and \$14 billion building the Competitive Renewable Energy Zone's transmission lines through their electricity bills. While most businesses must pay to bring their product to market, wind and solar get a free ride from Texas taxpayers.

If you add it all up, Texas taxpayers and ratepayers will shell out an estimated \$36 billion by the end of the decade to subsidize wind and solar energy. These subsidies have tripled wind and solar capacity in the Lone Star State in the past 10 years, but as Texans learned first-hand during the storm, there is a huge difference between capacity and generation.

Instead of seeking solutions that increase reliable generation, several Democrats in Congress have suggested the answer lies in connecting ERCOT, Texas' independent electricity grid, with the rest of the nation. As someone who lives in East Texas, one of the few parts of the state not served by ERCOT, I can tell you first-hand this wouldn't have prevented the blackouts—we lost power too. “Having a grid that could have drawn more power from other states would have done little to ease the crisis,” Loren Steffy wrote in Texas Monthly. “With most of the country also facing bitterly cold temperatures, the rest of the U.S. wouldn't have had much to spare anyway.”

Texas can't afford to come within minutes of total system failure ever again, and the only way to ensure it never happens is to reverse policy choices that have tilted the state's energy mix in favor of inefficient and unreliable sources. The mix needs to be rebalanced, with an emphasis on cheap, plentiful and reliable sources such as natural gas, coal and nuclear.

Mr. Christian, a Republican, is a commissioner of the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the state's oil and gas industry.

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