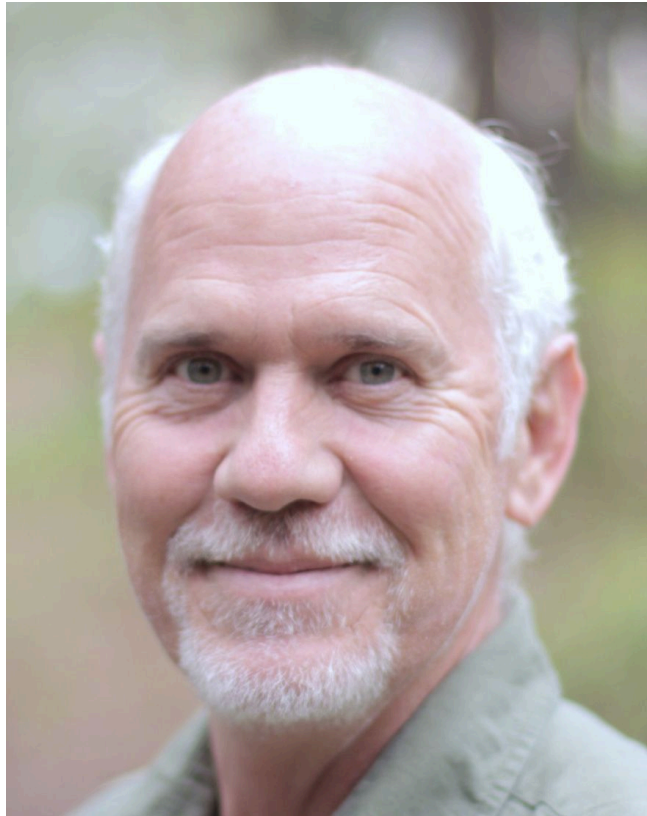

In My View: Where Does Our Power Come From?

June 18, 2023



There has been a lot of talk lately about the potential for wind farms far offshore of Crescent City. There is an allure that we could get cheap, reliable energy if we convince the wind developers to connect these gigawatts of electricity to land in Crescent City.

As I learned more about the potential of wind power, this made me curious to understand where our power comes from now. Here's what I learned.

CAISO

According to Wikipedia, the California Independent System Operator (CAISO) is a non-profit agency responsible for balancing the power grid for most of California. CAISO oversees the operation of California's bulk electric power system, transmission lines and electricity market generated and transmitted by its member agencies.

The CAISO is one of the largest ISOs in the world, delivering 300 million megawatts-hours each year and managing about 80% of California's electric flow. The three major partners with CAISO are Southern California Edison, San Diego Gas and Electric and Pacific Gas and Electric. This does not include Pacific Power, which provides our electricity.

We do not get our power from CAISO and are not even connected to the California Grid.

Pacific Power

Our power comes from the Pacific Power Company, a subsidiary of PacifiCorp, which is owned by Berkshire Hathaway Energy, an affiliate of Berkshire Hathaway whose primary shareholder is Warren Buffett. This is who our power comes from.

Pacific Power and Light was formed in 1910 from the merger of several financially troubled utilities in Washington and Oregon. In 1954 Pacific Power and Light merged with Mountain States Power Company and later acquired Utah Power and Light.

It is only through a quirk of corporate acquisitions that the Del Norte County grid is connected to the north and not to the south. In 1961, Pacific Power and Light purchased the California Oregon Power Company which extended their service area into southern Oregon and Northern California.

A reorganization in 2006 merged Pacific Power's territory in Wyoming with Utah Power territory to form Rocky Mountain Power. Today PacifiCorp has two subsidiaries including Pacific Power and Rocky Mountain Power which include service areas in Utah, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and California.

Power Peninsula

The main transmission line to our county comes from Grants Pass. The Del Norte County power grid is not connected to Humboldt County, and I learned recently that our grid does not connect to Brookings either.

This leaves us on a power peninsula jutting down from Oregon.

Several weeks ago, Pacific Power shut down our entire county grid for maintenance. I've never seen this before. That night I took a drive around the county, and everything was dark except for the occasional properties that had generators or battery back up power.

It was amazing to witness what our community looks like when all the power is out. I drove up to Brookings and as soon as I crossed the border to Oregon, it went from lights off to all lights on. This was a vivid visualization of our power disconnect to the north.

This single connection to electricity leaves us vulnerable to power interruptions. As a community we would benefit from having more locally generated electricity. This is one of the benefits that wind power could bring us.

Unfortunately, this lack of grid connections to California is also a major impediment to bringing wind power ashore in Del Norte County. How do we transmit this vast amount of power to the people that need it?

Current Power

I have covered how power is distributed and from whom. But what are the sources of our current power supplies?

In the CAISO service area, more than half of the electricity is produced from renewable sources. California is ranked first in the nation as a producer of electricity from solar, geothermal, and biomass and fourth in conventional hydroelectric power generation. But this does not include us.

According to their website, PacifiCorp owns 11,504 megawatts of generation capacity from a mix of hydro, wind, natural gas, coal, solar and geothermal sources. In 2022 the average mix of energy sources supplying Pacific Power customers is 42.0% coal, 19.1% natural gas, 15.7% wind, 4.3% hydro, 6.0% solar, 0.4% geothermal, 0.4% biomass and 12% other.

With more than 60% of our power coming from fossil fuels, this is not a green energy portfolio.

Can't Get There

The greatest challenge that we face in attracting offshore wind power companies to land a power transmission cable to our shores, is the reality that there are currently no transmission lines in place that can export this power out of our county. You can't get there from here.

These wind energy developers may choose to run an underwater power cable to San Francisco, though this would be very expensive. They may decide to land the cable in Humboldt County where they can use existing high-capacity transmission lines that were installed to export electricity from the now closed nuclear power plant.

It is a long shot possibility that this wind power cable could connect to the grid in Del Norte County, but right now there is no way to move the power out without going into Oregon. It is possible that the transmission lines between here and Grants Pass could be upgraded to increase transmission capacity, or a new line could be built over the mountains.

There will be a lot of money made by these offshore wind developments. This level of funding makes the impossible more possible. The ideal outcome for us is to engineer a way to have the power cable land at the Crescent City Harbor, upgrade our power transmission lines and to negotiate a long-term, low-cost power purchase agreement.

It Could Happen

We could have cheap power that will benefit local residents and serve as an enticement for new businesses to locate here. Our electricity could be from 100% clean renewable wind energy. That would be cool.

Kevin Hendrick is a 30-year resident of Del Norte County. kevinjameshendrick@gmail.com

