
Guest Column: Farmington, a town in need of a jolt

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The good news these days about Farmington, New Mexico, is that the air looks clear. That's a huge change.

For 60 years the air was dingy, polluted by two, enormous coal-fired power stations in nine units that produced 3,723 megawatts of generation — enough to power two million homes. Now, just 1,540 megawatts remain in two units equipped with modern, air-pollution control systems.

Starting in the 1960s, the town's giant smokestacks could be seen from miles away, and their dangerous emissions helped add the designation of "national sacrifice zone" to this Four Corners area. Pollutants included "beryllium compounds, chromium compounds, cobalt, and five other carcinogens," reports ProPublica.

But these days you might describe Farmington, population 46,422, as an attractive river town where "you can see mountains 100 miles away," says Mike Eisenfeld, energy and climate program manager of the San Juan Citizens Alliance, a regional environmental powerhouse with 1,000 members.

Farmington is becoming known for its recreation, ranging from national parks and monuments to eight miles of river walks and mountain biking on 120 miles of trails.

"Jolt Your Journey!" is how the town promotes itself to visitors. A cultural battle, though, is being fought over what substitutes for coal as a power supply.

Given the town's near-constant sunshine and underused grid tie-ins to Sunbelt cities, solar-powered electricity might seem the obvious replacement. However, the people with clout in town — Mayor Nate Duckett, City Manager Rob Mayes, and the nonprofit Farmington Electrical Utility — yearn for the good old days of fossil fuels.

Power from the now-closed San Juan Generating Station was cheap, says Mayor Duckett, who enjoys broad local support, having won his seat with 86% of the vote in his last election in 2018. "It was also homegrown," he adds, "and there were good jobs,"

To keep its coal plant open, Farmington, chased a carbon-capture scheme even though its history is one of failure. All eleven of President Obama's carbon capture projects have either gone belly up or were never built. A Mississippi coal project alone cost \$7.5 billion, leaving only mountains of scrap.

Farmington's failed carbon-capture scheme cost millions of dollars in legal fees and precious time. Without power-purchase contracts, Farmington Electric had no steady electrical supplier when its coal-fired electricity was switched off. The utility burned through a good portion of \$100 million in reserves buying gas and electricity on the open market.

To rebuild a financial cushion, the Farmington utility raised customer rates in April. This angered many residents though resentment had been simmering for years. Everyone knew that coal was nearing its end, yet no plans had been made for developing a major replacement.

Aztec, a town of 6,163, was once a customer of the Farmington utility, but it rebelled, now buying carbon-free electricity from Guzman Energy. Neighboring Bloomfield, population 7,371, says it also wants to partner with Guzman. Meanwhile, solar development has been flourishing around Farmington, with 1,300 megawatts of utility-scale generation either planned or under construction.

Farmington could easily get into the action since it can self-permit. It also owns those valuable grid tie-ins through its substations. In fairness, it has vague plans for a solar array, but an inefficient, gas-powered plant is what's in the process of getting built to augment a big gas plant they already own.

Thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act, which gave a boost to nonprofit utilities like Farmington Electric, there's federal money available to help build solar arrays. The Act allows a utility to build and sell renewable electricity while also raking in generous government incentives. Farmington's need is pressing, as both New Mexico and the region aren't producing enough homegrown energy.

All of the financial support right now for developing solar power adds to the frustration of area conservationists.

Mark Pearson, executive director of the San Juan Citizens Alliance, says, "Farmington... wants to export chemicals manufactured from natural gas in the region. But they have the means to export a finished product — electricity made from the sun — via high-voltage electric lines."

The Alliance's Eisenfeld thinks a tipping point is fast approaching. "You need the philosophical buy-in that the transition from coal to clean energy is actually upon us," he says. "Then it all happens quickly."

But for now, the good ole' boys are still in charge.

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