



Unintended consequences



by **GARY WIENS**, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

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FOR Texans, the week of Feb. 15, 2021, was literally one of their darkest ever. The five-day massive energy emergency not only shut down power across the state, but also cost lives.

Many Texans assumed power outages amidst the subfreezing weather would simply rotate through in a matter of a few hours. Instead, however, outright blackouts lasting for days occurred, causing some people to freeze to death. In some areas, power bills soared.

How did all this happen, and who or what is to blame? That debate is raging now in Texas and, to a lesser extent, in the nation's midsection, which was also impacted. At least for now, consistent with human nature, we'll see much finger pointing.


Hopefully, however, the blame game will subside and substantive solutions will be identified and implemented. But that won't be easy.

Although there were multiple contributing factors, many reviews concur one cause was a heavy dependence on intermittent, variable renewables combined with a shortage of traditional, large-scale power such as coal. In Texas during much of the

emergency week, wind or solar energy production was extremely low because the wind wasn't blowing and skies were cloudy.

This does not mean we should reject this type of energy. Montana's electric co-ops purchase it. But they're also not blind to its vulnerabilities. That is why co-ops are emphatic about holding on to power available on demand 24/7. A prime example is generation with its fuel stored on site – such as renewable hydropower producing electricity from stored water, or power produced from extensive coal supplies at hand.

Obviously, increasing dependency on carbon-free intermittent energy is driven largely by concern about climate change. This is a legitimate concern. But should it displace or diminish all others? Was that the case in Texas? To a degree, it seems. It's one thing to seek solutions. Yet it's quite another for this concern to become a consuming ideology, creating considerable potential for high-risk choices with unintended consequences.

When that occurs, we're no longer in control. As someone once said, "An idea is something you have. An ideology is something that has you." 

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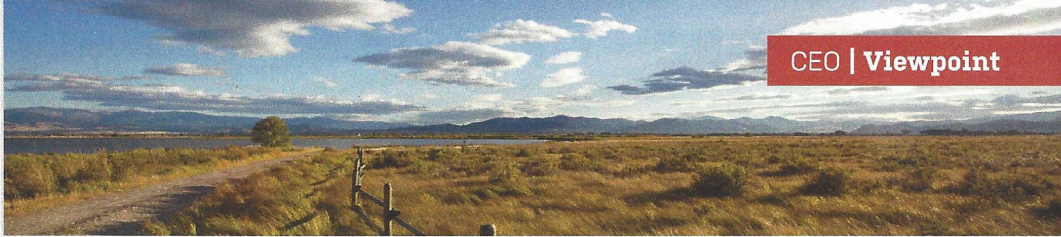
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Power blackouts: PART 2



by **GARY WIENS**, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

THANK you to those of you who provided feedback regarding my April column in *Rural Montana* concerning the mid-February Texas power blackouts. I appreciate knowing your views. The dialogue with our co-op members is invaluable!


Reiterating my expression of concern about dependency on variable, intermittent renewables, as I stated in the column, renewables were one of “multiple contributing factors” in the Texas blackouts.

Another one of those factors was there was 14,000 megawatts (MW) less gas generation available than the Texas grid operators' worst-case calculation. So, clearly, if more of the gas was online the outages would not have been necessary. Also, however, if all the 18,000 MW of wind projected would have been available the 5,000 MW of rolling outages would not have been required.

My point is two-fold: Without days or weeks' worth of energy storage we cannot yet count on wind and solar to provide needed capacity to meet demand. Of course, it is also extremely important to ensure gas generation has its fuel supply available throughout peak times when residential and

commercial uses of gas require high volumes, as well as addressing gas storage limitations that were part of the supply problem. The retirement of coal generating stations, which have on-site storage, is an issue as well.

In short, the problem Texas experienced with gas generation not being available as projected is solvable — such as addressing gas storage limitations or insulating gas pipelines. But the basic shortcoming of wind or solar energy is reality — it continues to only be available when the wind blows or sun shines and, as seen in Texas, its availability can rapidly disappear. Renewables, such as wind or solar, should be utilized but their shortcoming should also not be minimized. And my overall assertion — certainly arguable — is that the decision-making on these renewables often seems driven by ideology rather than what should be the priority — having the most reliable and resilient grid possible.

There are many more contributing factors such as listed energy-import ability, but I hope this provides more insight into the aspects of thermal and renewable contributions to this weather-initiated event. 

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