



THE TAOS NEWS

In 2007 Voted Best Weekly Newspaper in the U.S. by the National Newspaper Assoc.

Senators, congressman weigh in on co-op's renewables cap debate

By J.R. Logan

The Taos News, 12/26/2013

Three members of New Mexico's congressional delegation have sent a letter to Kit Carson Electric Cooperative's wholesale power supplier, urging it to consider lifting the cap on the amount of renewable energy the co-op can generate on its own.

The Dec. 17 letter to Kenneth Anderson, general manager of Tri-State Generation and Transmission, was signed by Sen. Tom Udall, Sen. Martin Heinrich, and Congressman Ben Ray Luján, all Democrats from New Mexico.

The co-op is contractually prohibited from generating more than 5 percent of its total energy needs using its own facilities, and it has nearly hit that ceiling by building several solar arrays across its service area in the last few years.

The co-op has asked that Tri-State raise the limit to allow it to continue expanding its solar program, but Tri-State has so far been unwilling to budge.

The letter from the congressional delegation asks Tri-State to take another look.

"We ask that you give careful consideration to Kit Carson's request to provide up to 10 percent renewable energy to meet the desire of its members," the letter to Anderson reads.

To download a copy of the letter, find this story at taosnews.com.

Co-op CEO Luis Reyes told *The Taos News* that the letter is a strong indicator of the community's desire to adopt more renewables. "I think the letter just shows the elected officials believe this could and should be done," Reyes said.

Reyes said bringing more solar onto the Kit Carson grid is feasible now. A study by Los Alamos National Laboratories found that, with its current infrastructure, the co-op could generate up to 20 percent of its total energy needs through solar power without sacrificing reliability. Reyes also notes that costs continue to drop and solar energy is a more stable, long-term source of electricity.

Dan Weinman, CEO of PPC Solar, said the 5 percent cap is holding up his company. PPC has done multiple arrays for Kit Carson, but the limit means the company has worked itself out of a job in Taos.

“We really want to get that cap lifted and be able to start meeting our potential here,” Weinman told *The Taos News*. “There is an opportunity for more solar, and we’ve got to figure out how we can get there.

In 2011, a spokesman for Tri-State gave several reasons for the cap, one of which was that the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) limits the amount of energy local distribution co-ops like Kit Carson can generate in order to ensure that Tri-State can pay back its loans. The letter from the delegation addresses that claim and notes that RUS has allowed other generation and transmission cooperatives to let local co-ops generate up to 15 percent of their peak load on their own. A spokesperson from RUS did not confirm that assertion before press time.

Bill Brown, a member of the local nonprofit Renewable Taos, says the group sought guidance from representatives in Washington to better understand the reason for the limit.

“When we started talking about this, the conversation almost always stopped at the 5 percent limit,” Brown said. “But that’s just a limit that’s on a piece of paper. There are ways around that.”

Brown said the letter from the senators and congressman help to pressure Tri-State to raise the cap and loosen the reins on Kit Carson’s solar initiatives. “We’re very pleased that our Congress people are taking this as seriously as they have,” Brown said. “It’s very powerful and it’s somewhat inspiring to our effort.”