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My Turn

New Mexico energy plan takes wrong approach

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Last week, Gov. Martinez released an energy plan for New Mexico. We applaud the governor for recognizing the importance of clean energy and energy efficiency, but the thrust of her plan is a stale hodgepodge of actions that props up the fossil fuel industry. It is also remarkable that “climate change” does not make a single appearance in the plan, demonstrating an acute failure to grasp the nature of the intertwined climate and energy challenges ahead of us.

Climate change is not just a global issue. It’s a personal, local issue of great importance to all New Mexicans, including here in Taos. Climate change contributes to drought and wildfire that threatens our mountain snowpack, our water supplies, and our farms and ranches — impacts that harm not only our beloved natural heritage, but our economy and communities as well. Climate change, of course, is also an opportunity to rethink how best to respect and to live on our lands, to produce energy, and to develop a vibrant and durable economy.

A truly comprehensive energy plan would — unlike the governor’s — acknowledge climate change and stand on three key pillars. First, we must invest in communities, not corporations. In the fossil fuel industry, corporations come and go, facilitating a boombust cycle that undermines the long-term social and economic durability of our communities. Investing in communities lets us decide our own fate and develop economies rooted in New Mexican — not corporate — values. This also helps train the next generation of New Mexican engineers, innovators, and other workers that are the key to a vibrant and durable economy.

Second, we must urgently speed our transition to clean energy from New Mexico’s sun, wind, and water. A June 2015 Stanford engineering study demonstrates that New Mexico can power 100 percent of its energy needs with clean, homegrown energy by 2050. But to accomplish this, we need our state government to support innovative action that embraces and strengthens the clean energy revolution already underway, not double-down on fossil fuels.

Third, we must protect our land, air, and water from the harms caused by ongoing energy development. This means protecting special, sacred lands, like the Greater Chaco landscape, from industrial-scale shale oil fracking. It also means ensuring, when drilling does take place, that oil and gas companies take sensible action to prevent the harm that drilling causes.

For example, looming over northwest New Mexico is the nation’s largest cloud of methane. Methane is a climate pollutant over 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Methane emissions also come with smog-forming and hazardous pollutants that threaten public health. But when properly captured, methane — the primary ingredient of natural gas — serves as a

source of energy for homes, schools, and businesses, as well as a source of royalties for our state and local governments.

Fortunately, there are proven, off-the-shelf, and often cost-effective technologies and practices to reduce or eliminate methane waste caused by the oil and gas industry. Indeed, a study by ICF International shows that the oil and gas industry could easily reduce methane waste by 40 percent at an average annual cost of less than one cent per thousand cubic feet of produced natural gas.

The federal government is, right now, developing rules to reduce methane waste from oil and gas operations. On federal and tribal lands alone, a 40 percent reduction of methane waste would better safeguard our climate and public health while producing additional energy sufficient to provide for the home and cooking needs of 530,000 New Mexicans. New Mexico can and should build on those rules with a policy of “zero tolerance” to methane waste applicable across the state, following in the footsteps of our sister state to the north, Colorado.

By building these three pillars we can work together as New Mexicans to secure our energy future, to combat climate change, to protect our natural heritage, and to build a vibrant, durable clean energy economy that is rooted in the values of our communities. Sadly though, Gov. Martinez’ energy plan misses the mark.

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