



Column: Gas pipeline needed to ensure energy mix

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Carl Gustin

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Gov. Charlie Baker is right to push for a new natural gas pipeline. His support for renewable energy – solar and wind – is fully compatible with his support for more natural gas. They are two halves of the same energy foundation supporting a structure that is both more affordable and better for the environment.

Those who oppose his position on natural gas might look at the success Texas is having integrating into its electric grid intermittent renewable resources – wind and solar – with greater use of natural gas.

The Wall Street Journal reported Aug. 29 on the rapid growth of wind energy in Texas since 2001. Today, it accounts for 16 percent of Texas' electric power generation, up from just 2 percent in 2001. It also reports that Texas is anticipating a "huge surge" in solar capacity.

What does this have to do with natural gas?

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, natural gas electricity generation in Texas increased 20 percent over the past five years. Natural gas now generates about 48 percent of electricity in Texas – as it does in New England – while generation from coal-fired plants has fallen nearly 25 percent.

Texas, like California, is successfully integrating traditional electric power generation with intermittent renewable generation. As a result, energy markets are more competitive, price volatility has been reduced, emission levels have declined, and reliability of service is assured.

In New England, affordability and reliability have become secondary issues for many as virtually every infrastructure project faces strong and growing opposition. Whether it's an electric transmission line needed to deliver wind energy or hydroelectric power; a wind generation project on mountaintops in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont; or natural gas pipelines in almost any location, opposition often overshadows need and value, both in economic and environmental terms.

Juxtapose New England's apparent move toward a renewables-only approach with events elsewhere and one might experience a head-scratching moment. Consider a recent Wall Street Journal story on General Electric, which the newspaper described as "bullish about coal again." It noted that GE is "poised to build coal plants in developing countries' economies ... where demand for power is growing quickly and other sources of fuel are unavailable or too costly." GE doesn't appear to be ignoring environmental concerns, however. On the contrary, consider its announcement, reported in the Boston

Globe Aug. 30, that it is “joining an energy research program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with the goal of tapping new thinking on cutting carbon emissions and replacing fossil fuels...”

A week earlier, the Washington Post reported on “a surprisingly tight relationship between renewables on the one hand, and (natural) gas on the other.” The Post story was on a National Bureau of Economic Research assessment of experience in 26 countries that found “a 1 percent increase in the share of fast-reacting fossil technologies is associated with a 0.88 percent increase in renewable generation in the long term.”

One takeaway from these stories is that around the world, projects that would be unthinkable in New England are essential to developing economies as leaders seek for their citizens the benefits of affordable and reliable energy, benefits we often take for granted. Another is that the energy industry is making great inroads in pursuing cleaner technologies, just as GE is doing even with coal as it works to improve efficiency and reduce emissions while at the same time staking out a leadership role in energy efficiency and renewables.

Texas’ experience, the NBER findings, and GE’s all-resource business strategy are reminders that renewable energy and energy from more traditional power plants are not incompatible with economic and environmental goals. In fact, weakening one half of the foundation ultimately will weaken the other. Gov. Baker gets that and it is reflected in his all-resource, “combo platter” approach to energy policy.

Carl Gustin is a consultant to the New England Coalition for Affordable Energy, whose members include major business and industry organizations and labor unions throughout New England.