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# Commentary | Why energy policy must include environmental justice



A state legislative proposal aims to link California's energy system with other Western states. (Associated Press file photo)

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**I**n 2010, San Diegans won a huge victory in decommissioning the South Bay Power Plant. The natural-gas fired plant raised concerns about poor air quality and asthma in the surrounding Latino/a community of [Chula Vista](#) for too long. It occupied precious San Diego Bayfront land, and perpetuated our state's dependence on fossil fuels at a time when we needed to turn towards renewable energy.

Instead of creating a renewable energy policy that replicates the success of the South Bay closure statewide or incorporates the lessons learned, a major new energy bill — Assembly Bill 813 by Assemblyman Chris Holden, D-Pasadena — fails to include the environmental justice protections our communities need.

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AB 813 proposes to link California's energy system with other Western states. The theory is that a "regionalized" grid would ensure more reliable energy delivery and more renewable energy use. For example, energy generated by wind turbines in Wyoming could be sent to San Diego when renewable energy is not readily available, and San Diego's solar energy could be sent to other states when too much is generated..

Don't get us wrong — we agree that more renewables and coordination across the energy grid is needed. Renewable energy is critical to halting more catastrophic impacts of climate change, speeds the transition off fossil fuels, less explosions, and less dirty air for residents to breathe. But the path outlined by AB 813 does not include protections for environmental justice communities, and there are other alternatives that should be considered.

The large-scale plan outlined in AB 813 overlooks localized, negative impacts in low-income communities and communities of color, as is often the case in far-reaching environmental policy concepts. If not carefully safeguarded against, regionalization can actually increase localized air quality emissions from dirty gas-fired power plants. More and more, gas-fired power plants are being used as a backup for renewable energy. When they are used in this way, they can emit up to 38 times more harmful toxins than when they are operating normally.

Even the operation of one power plant significantly impacts the air we breathe. For example, a study found that emissions from the Pio Pico Energy Center natural gas peaker plant, located in Otay Mesa, could nearly double the one-hour concentration of nitrogen oxide from background levels and contributes to the area's lack of compliance with certain federal air quality standards.

The use of power plants to back up renewables and the accompanying, increased pollution could expand under regionalization, but are not addressed in AB 813. Furthermore, the bill creates no clear path towards phasing out these fossil fuel dinosaurs, even as we've been seeing gas-fired power plants being retired across the state.

Also at risk are our long-term efforts to create more renewable energy projects located directly in the very communities that have suffered years of pollution from fossil fuels. Many low-income communities and communities of color are still largely left behind in the transformation to a green grid. While regionalization would create opportunities to utilize more renewable energy overall, it does not prioritize procuring renewable energy and related jobs in California or in our most impacted communities.

We've created programs that start to close this gap. For example, we worked hard to create the Solar On Multifamily Affordable Housing program, which finances small-scale renewable energy on apartment buildings. We want these programs to be a part of California's energy future, but it is unclear how these programs would fare under the regional market created by AB 813.

Finally, there is a potential loss of oversight over our energy grid. Currently, the California Independent Systems Operator (ISO) is accountable to the California Legislature, but AB 813 would shift that oversight to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). It was a deep struggle to work with the ISO during the South Bay campaign, when it was simply a California entity — imagine how hard it would be for other communities if FERC, a federal entity, were in charge.

Without a doubt, we must aggressively move towards renewable energy in California, but our policies must be rooted in equity. We cannot let communities of color once again bear the burden of a policy that could harm resident health while delivering benefits elsewhere. We can have increased reliability and renewable energy, with equity and justice — and our elected officials should settle for no less.

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