

Op-Ed: Closing Belledune, Coleson Cove would cause electrical rates to skyrocket

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The union representing NB Power workers doesn't want the Belledune Generating Station, shown in the background, to close down prematurely.

Submitted

While the provincial government's all-party committee has come up with a good number of solid recommendations on what New Brunswick should do as its part to reduce the extent and effects of climate change, not all of the suggestions seem to have been well thought out.

When the climate change committee recommends we move off all fossil fuels for electrical generation by 2030, we have to wonder whether the committee has paid any attention to what has taken place in so many other jurisdictions

that have gone this route and are now scrambling to try to undo what they caused. And that's not speculation; the evidence is out there.

Take Michigan. There the head of the state's Public Service Commission has warned that the state could "go dark" if measures aren't taken very soon to reverse the loss of base load power generation that resulted from the government decision to close down fossil fuel plants and rely on solar and wind.

Germany is another cautionary tale. The country's former finance minister is quoted saying "What started as a reasonable shift over to renewable energies some 15 years ago has since morphed into a development that has totally run amok." The effect on German industry has been described as "destroying the industrial heartland." Closer to home look at Ontario. There, rates have ballooned to the point that manufacturers have taken up stakes and moved because they can't afford to stay, and of course they took their jobs with them. Meantime, the Ontario government is backtracking to try to salvage what it can.

But still, our government's climate change committee has recommended that we go down that same path. This means the premature closing down of the coal-fired Belledune generating station and the oil-fired Coleson Cove plant. While few beyond climate change deniers would disagree fossil fuel plants need to be phased out at the end of their normal lifespan, the timetable suggested by the committee would cause serious issues for New Brunswickers.

We submit there are three specific reasons why it would unreasonable and unwise to prematurely close Belledune or Coleson Cove, as recommended by the climate change committee.

1. **Reliability.** Belledune, along with Point Lepreau, provide what is considered "base-load" power. And Coleson Cove is there to provide base-load back-up for times when either of the other plants is off line, and to help

in times of peak demand. Base-load power generation is necessary to ensure a steady supply of electricity that isn't conditional on the wind blowing or the sun shining. Some suggest that reliability can be assured without adequate base-load simply by importing power from a nearby jurisdiction such as Hydro-Québec. But that's increasingly non-viable because during storms, or times of very cold or very hot weather, these other jurisdictions may not have extra power to sell when we need it.

2. Affordability. NB Power estimates show that if Belledune were taken out of the mix, ratepayers would face a rate increase of about 38 per cent. That's an extra \$735 per year for the average family and almost \$850 with tax.

3. Jobs. Belledune and Colson Cove directly employ well over 200 people, with another 200-plus indirect jobs.

In short, if the Belledune and Colson Cove facilities are mothballed prematurely, it would mean a reliable, steady supply of electricity could not be assured, rates would increase 38 per cent, and about 400 good jobs would be lost in an already economically challenged province. All of this on one side of the equation. On the other, the elimination of 1/1000th of one per cent of the world's greenhouse gases. It simply doesn't make sense.

Consider as well that NB Power's electricity generation is already 75 per cent non-emitting; 42 per cent from renewables and the other 28 per cent from nuclear. And its smart grid initiative will lead to further reductions in demand. The point is, NB Power is on the right track. Rushing it by eliminating the fossil fuel plants from the mix prematurely will create chaos, from stability issues to economic hardship for residents and industry alike.

Our sincere wish is that either the committee revisit this particular recommendation or that the government understand the negative ramifications of adopting it, and decide against going too far, too fast. The day will surely come when fossil fuels will be totally replaced by renewable energy sources -- when the technology is advanced enough to make it viable.

We look forward to that day, when our highly skilled IBEW members can transition, bringing and adapting their skills to provide a new generation of sustainable, affordable power. But we're not there yet. What we ask is that we be sensible in the interim.

Ross Galbraith is business manager of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 37, which represents more than 2,000 NB Power employees.