

# RM

## Rural Montana

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## VIEWPOINT Dave Wheelihan



Dave Wheelihan

### Challenges of renewables

This month's Rural Montana looks at another piece of the puzzle that will help us reduce greenhouse gases in America. The piece we look at in this issue is renewable energy. As we have said before, renewable energy will play a role in reducing greenhouse gases, but, like the other pieces we have looked at in recent issues, it is part of the solution, not the solution.

Electric cooperatives in the United States have been leaders in bringing renewable energy on line and have more renewable energy as part of their energy portfolios than other traditional power suppliers. Here in Montana, electric cooperatives receive approximately 68 percent of their power from hydroelectricity, which has basically a zero carbon footprint, and as we know, is a renewable resource. In addition, Montana electric cooperatives have wind energy and waste heat recovery energy in their portfolios. Our largest electric cooperative, Flathead Electric, is pursuing biomass electricity as part of their supplemental

power. We are also very excited about the new national renewable generation and transmission cooperative that is being formed to develop and promote renewable energy. You can read about it in this month's issue.

On the inside back cover of the magazine, one of our electric cooperative trustees talks about renewable energy as part of the solution to greenhouse gas emissions. He does caution the reader to recognize there are challenges associated with integrating wind energy into the grid. We thought the following piece from the Texas Electric Cooperative newsletter might be of interest: On Feb. 26, 2008, Energy Reliability Council of Texas, (ERCOT), the state's largest grid operator, asked interruptible industrial customers — those who had agreed in advance to curtail operation in time of crisis — to shut down at 6:41 p.m. There was a sudden increase in electricity use during a time when several conventional plants were off-line and West Texas wind farms had drastically dropped output

because the wind had abated. Wind electricity plummeted about 1,700 MW to about 300MW. In other words, without warning, the system lost the capacity to power approximately 140,000 homes. To avoid rolling blackouts, the interruptible industrial customers ceased operations until 9:40 p.m., when the ERCOT grid was returned to stability. Such industrial customers get a break on their electricity prices for being flexible in their consumption. The lack of wind power also caused the wholesale prices of electricity to spike. ERCOT even had to buy electricity from Mexico.

We think the foregoing piece aptly demonstrates challenges associated with integrating renewable energy into the grid. That being said, as we stated earlier, renewables are part of the solution to global warming and electric cooperatives will continue to integrate them where economically viable and where system reliability is not compromised.

Dave Wheelihan is CEO of the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

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