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Viewpoints: Renewable energy, not fracking, is the best choice for California

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A debate currently raging in the California Legislature will greatly influence the state's economic and energy future. The oil and gas industry is lobbying hard to expand hydraulic fracturing – a dangerous process commonly known as fracking – into the Central Valley's world-class agricultural lands, and there's no shortage of controversy over the projected impacts.

Unfortunately, the debate has fallen into the false choice between the economy and the environment. This is not the real choice at hand. Expanding the development of clean energy in California can drive sustained economic growth while also protecting the state's vital agricultural and environmental resources.

The renewable energy industry has already proven itself a powerful and reliable economic driver in California. Since 1995, the clean energy economy has grown by more than 120 percent, 10 times more than California's overall economic growth during the same period. Clean energy generation was in fact one of California's few "recession resistant" industries that provided steady employment during the recent economic downturn. We have a real opportunity to spur additional innovation, private investment and job creation by accelerating the deployment of more clean energy.

Forward-thinking utilities in the state are realizing that smart energy policies can translate Californians' increasing demand for renewable energy into significant economic growth. Earlier this year, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power unveiled its Clean LA Solar Initiative, which opens the energy market to broader participation by enabling individuals, organizations and businesses to build local solar projects and sell the energy produced to the utility.

The program has received huge interest. During the program's opening week, the Department of Water and Power received applications to build more local solar projects than the entire program currently allows – highlighting a major economic opportunity to develop more local solar. If Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti follows through on his campaign pledge to expand the program to 600 megawatts, a UCLA study found his city would reap 18,000 new jobs and \$2 billion in private investment.

Sacramento initiated a similar program with startling success in 2010. In just two years, the Sacramento Municipal Utility District brought enough solar energy online to provide peak power to 100,000 homes without impacting electric rates. Extending Sacramento's program across California would significantly increase the amount of cost-effective solar, thus creating tens of thousands of in-state jobs and spurring billions in private investment.

In contrast, fracking poses significant risks to our economy and our environment. To access oil stored in the Monterey shale, new and unproven techniques are required. Oil and gas companies inject water mixed with a cocktail of toxic chemicals, including known carcinogens, deep underground. While concrete casings are designed to contain these chemicals, there's increasing evidence that many fail or will soon fail – releasing chemicals and unburned methane into our water, soil and air. This not only endangers human health but also threatens California's agriculture industry, a central pillar of our economy.

The agricultural sector pumps \$17 billion into the state's economy each year and needs access to clean water for continued productivity. Fracking raises serious concerns about the long-term contamination of aquifers, which are the lifeblood for farmers in the Central Valley. Already, farmers there are initiating lawsuits due to contamination. With its promises of short-term economic gains, fracking unwisely endangers agriculture, one of our state's most important industries.

Californians will be tied to today's energy decisions for decades to come. The state can continue to grow its economy by building upon the proven success of renewable energy or can jeopardize its world-class agricultural lands by allowing the oil and gas industry to expand fracking operations across the Central Valley. Why accept the serious risks posed by fracking when the further development of clean energy is the only option that will bring lasting benefits?

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