

Green energy group sees 'kinks in the armor' of natural gas power after Calif. shortages

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A grueling cold snap last week stretched natural gas supplies in California, prompting the state's grid operator to call on users to cut their electricity use.

Environmentalists have seized on the California Independent System Operator's Feb. 6 "Flex Alert" as evidence that the state should switch to renewable power sources (EnergyWire, Feb. 7).

"The biggest strength one could argue for natural gas is that it's supposedly reliable -- we've seen some kinks in that armor," said Craig Lewis, founder of the Clean Coalition, a nonprofit organization calling for faster buildout of green power in California. "I would say this ["Flex Alert"] is actually a sign that we need to be turning away from natural gas and not building dependency on what's already a really significant percentage of our energy mix."

Speaking before energy policymakers yesterday in Sacramento, Lewis challenged projections showing that renewable power sources such as wind and solar could tax grid reliability in the Golden State.

He told the California Energy Commission that CAISO's "duck chart" of daytime conventional power demand in 2020 fails to consider other changes in store for the state's energy system, such as demand-response solutions and better energy storage capacity (ClimateWire, Oct. 16, 2013).

The chart -- said to resemble the shape of a duck -- shows how rising integration of renewables could lead to wild swings in demand for conventional power.

The California ISO stood by its "duck chart" analysis in a statement yesterday, noting that it was updated last year with new information.

"The Duck Chart just shows how conditions and generation ramping needs change over time for a sample winter/spring day and does not infer anything about fleet capability to respond to future demand and supply variability," spokesman Steven Greenlee said in an email.

California's energy goals require it to generate 33 percent of its

electricity from renewable sources by 2020. Some worry that the grid may not be able to rely on off-and-on sources such as solar without plenty of natural gas-fired power generation as backup.

Lewis said fears of grid consequences from solar and wind inconsistencies are overstated.

"Is the 'duck' real or is it a decoy? It looks mighty friendly to natural gas," he said.