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**Montana’s cleanest energy is also our cheapest energy**

[350 Montana](https://www.350montana.org/) released a Montana energy modeling study today and filed two legal initiatives to speed Montana’s transition to clean, less expensive renewable energy.

Together with Missoula residents Eric and Abigail Huseth and Jerome Walker, 350 Montana filed a complaint in Missoula District Court to declare Montana’s “pre-approval” statute (MCA-69-8-421) unconstitutional because the law grants special privileges to an out-of-state corporation, NorthWestern Energy. The lawsuit seeks preliminary and permanent injunctions on the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) from granting “pre-approval” for the construction and operation of NorthWestern’s newly announced 750-MW natural gas plant in Laurel, Montana, and any other “pre-approval” application filed in the future.

NorthWestern’s CEO Bob Rowe, while a commissioner with the PSC, called “pre-approval” a moral hazard, something that has, indeed, proven true since the statute was passed in 2003.

350 Montana and the Huseths also filed to intervene with the PSC in the regulatory process for “pre-approval” of the gas plant (Docket 2021.02.022). As an intervener, 350 Montana will call into question whether the “pre-approval” process is adequate to ensuring long-term, low-cost resources consistent with Montana’s constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment.

According to its *2019 Procurement Plan*, NorthWestern says the least costly way to fill its electrical deficit consists is building a fleet of new gas-fired Reciprocating Internal Combustion Engines (RICE) costing more than $1 billion. The Laurel plant is the first of many.

Alarmed by NorthWestern’s conclusions, the PSC brought in a consultant, Synapse Energy Economics, to evaluate the company’s modeling. Synapse found NorthWestern’s assumptions created “an overreliance on new thermal [fossil fuel] capacity.” The corporation also undervalued wind and solar to such an extent that the result “practically guarantees” the company “will not select these resources as part of a least-cost resource portfolio.”

In broad terms, the “pre-approval” process and NorthWestern’s wholly inadequate modeling guarantees an expensive energy pathway ratepayers will be paying for over decades, likely long after the gas plant is retired due to market trends.

This past year, 350 Montana sought an objective view of Montana’s energy future and hired a Colorado firm, [Vibrant Clean Energy](https://www.vibrantcleanenergy.com/), to examine Montana’s future energy needs and the cheapest pathways to meet those needs.

“Vibrant Clean Energy is led by Ph.D. scientists who discovered their research in electrical grid optimization had such immediate policy relevance that they started VCE to meet this demand,” said Steve Running, Ph.D., University of Montana Professor Emeritus and Nobel Laureate. “The VCE optimization modeling is state-of-the-art and incorporates the latest geospacial datasets and climatologies.”

We are releasing this new study, *Affordable and Reliable Decarbonization Pathways for Montana*, today.

The study link [is here](https://www.350montana.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/350Montana-Affordable-and-Reliable-Decarbonization-Pathways-for-Montana.pdf). Our executive summary [is here](https://www.350montana.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Montana-Grid-Lab-Executive-Summary.pdf).

Blessed as we are with world-class hydroelectric, wind, and solar generation, Montana can retire its Colstrip coal plants, never build another natural gas plant, and still meet people’s energy needs through clean, renewable energy, while reducing ratepayers’ electricity bills and boosting the state’s economy. We could even export energy to adjoining states like we do now.

“The stakes couldn’t be higher,” said Jeff Smith, 350 Montana’s co-chair. “And our timing, given what Montana scientists said in [The Montana Climate Assessme](https://montanaclimate.org/chapter/executive-summary)nt three years ago, couldn’t be more critical.”

“This new gas plant that NorthWestern proposes will substantially raise rates,” said Monica Tranel, one of 350 Montana’s attorneys, “and, as the 350 Montana study points out, it’s going in the wrong direction.”

“If NorthWestern builds this gas plant, Montanan families will see an increase of $80 a year,” said Eric Huseth, pastor of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Bonner, Montana. “[Wind and solar are exponentially cheaper](https://ourworldindata.org/cheap-renewables-growth) than even 10 years ago,” said his wife, Abigail. “We have to make sure this company gives renewable energy a fair shake.”

“350 Montana’s study points to a bold new direction and a bold new era,” said Jerome Walker, M.D., a retired neurologist living in Missoula. “Right now, the cleanest energy is the cheapest energy.”

Vibrant Clean Energy evaluated five separate pathways: business-as-usual, keeping coal, moving to 100 percent renewable electricity by 2035 but allowing imports, moving to 100 percent renewable electricity by 2035 without imports, and a rapid “de-carbonization” of Montana’s entire energy sector.

The results are startling. Given that utility-scale [solar has fallen in price by 89 percent over the past 10 years and wind has fallen 70 percent](https://www.lazard.com/perspective/levelized-cost-of-energy-and-levelized-cost-of-storage-2020/), Montana can retire its fossil fuel plants and replace them with reliable renewable energy backed by battery storage and save ratepayers billions of dollars. If we keep Colstrip going or build gas plants, it will cost ratepayers more than a $1 billion by 2040.

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