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OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Replacing Pilgrim with renewables, conservation

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The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has stated that natural gas may be the "go-to" option in Massachusetts due its low cost and a decision by the state Department of Public Utilities that makes it easier for the industry to finance new pipelines by using funds from electricity ratepayers. There are already several proposals for new pipelines in the works, but these are facing grassroots opposition.

USC cautions over-reliance on natural gas. Massachusetts is already heavily dependent on this source – more than 50 percent of our in-state electricity generation currently comes from natural gas. If Pilgrim were replaced with it, our in-state generation could increase to more than 70 percent. Becoming overly-reliant on natural gas creates financial risk, places the economy and consumers at risk from fluctuating gas prices, weakens efforts to cut emissions, and more.

According to USC, the U.S. Department of Energy has projected that the cost of natural gas will rise as demand increases. This means consumers will eventually have to pay more once costs go up. Too much natural gas also undermines long-term carbon emission reductions. Keep in mind that the Federal Clean Power Plan, finalized in August 2015, requires states to develop plans to cut emissions 32 percent (of 2005 levels) by 2030. While natural gas, a fossil fuel, produces much less carbon emissions than coal or oil, it still produces emissions. As with nuclear, it is important to consider the life-cycle of an energy source to appreciate the true impacts. Drilling, extraction, and pipeline activities associated with natural gas result in methane leaks. Compared to carbon dioxide, methane is a far more potent greenhouse gas that could escalate climate chaos.

Our state's plan – including the role of natural gas – will define our energy future for many decades to come. Massachusetts, like the world, is at a crossroads. Our state will invest billions to replace power from outdated and dangerous nuclear, coal and oil facilities with new infrastructure. Instead of relying solely on natural gas for short-term gains, the state must play the long game and ensure adoption of energy policies that support further development of renewable energy resources, protect against climate change impacts and environmental degradation, and protect consumers. There are several bills pending now that would incentivize more renewable energy and save consumers money.

Energy efficiency and conservation measures are the first steps to a secure future. There are already a variety of energy efficiency programs currently in place for residents, organizations, businesses, municipalities, and state agencies. From 2011-2013, Massachusetts was ranked top in the nation for energy efficiency by the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy's (ACEEE's) State Energy Efficiency Scorecard. According to New England ISO's 2014 state profile card for Massachusetts, energy efficiency efforts have slowed the growth of energy demand and the rate of overall energy use will be 13 percent less by 2021 due to energy efficiency improvements. These are great steps, but even more efficiency efforts are needed.

As Massachusetts addresses Pilgrim's closure and carbon emissions via the Federal Clean Power Plan, it is important to remember that the real power is in our hands. We, as residents, can and must do more. To make real progress we must invest in energy efficient appliances and lighting, reduce our use, and spur companies that dominate the grid to help us more and reduce wasted electricity.

Increasing renewables and energy efficiency efforts would meet needs, lead to true cuts in emissions, and protect consumers. It is possible for renewables and energy efficiency – not just natural gas – to replace the energy lost from Pilgrim and other old systems – this is not only a moral obligation, but a necessity to get us to the clean energy future we urgently need.

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