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As a former chairman of the Illinois Commerce Commission, I am astonished at the commission's decision Dec. 28 to allow the state agency that buys electricity on behalf of utility customers to sign long-term supply contracts from wind farms at rates far more expensive than prevailing market rates.

As an electricity consumer, I'm outraged that the commission endorsed this boondoggle that will use rate-payer money to subsidize an economically inefficient and high-cost scheme in the name of environmental correctness ("Illinois Commerce Commission OKs plan to buy power from wind farms amid some price concerns," News, Dec. 29).

We consumers will get an idea how much this will cost us in June, when the Illinois Power Agency incorporates the price of renewable electricity in its rates.

Inevitably those prices will be higher than rates paid by consumers for power generated from Illinois utilities' nuclear and coal plants. The Illinois Public Utilities Act requires the ICC to approve only those rates that provide service at the lowest total cost. Renewable-power proponents finesse that mandate by claiming that renewable sources of generation -- wind, solar, geothermal, etc. -- need public subsidies to gain a foothold in the energy economy.

Hence the ICC approved the purchase of high-cost electricity generated at wind farms for five years.

For the last five or six years, the consumer price for wind power in Illinois has averaged about 50 percent higher per kilowatt hour than the price for nuclear-generated power.

In other words, the economic needs of members of the American Wind Energy Association and Renewable Power Markets Access Inc. trump consumers' needs.

But the cost to Illinois consumers goes far beyond what will show up in their monthly utility bills.

In Illinois, replacing hydrocarbons with "green" energy will require many hundreds or thousands of acres of land for turbines, solar panels, geothermal facilities and transmission lines.



I question the ICC: Does it support relaxing environmental study, endangered species and other laws to fast-track approval of these projects, despite their impacts on habitats?

The commission, at least during my tenure, created a strong record of protecting the rights of landowners.

I question the ICC: Does it favor eminent domain, so that government can seize people's property and expedite construction of these projects?

Forcing nationwide cuts in carbon dioxide emissions offers only speculative environmental benefits, if any, because a switch to wind and solar power will certainly cause environmental degradation. It requires 600 square miles of wind turbines to produce the same 1,000 megawatts of electricity as a single medium-to-large coal power plant.

Even in favorable locations, wind turbines can supply electrical power only about 20 percent of the time, meaning utilities must still have an alternative baseload source to compensate for wind fluctuations. By taking coal and natural gas out of production, carbon dioxide restrictions will require a massive program to build more nuclear power plants to supply this baseload.

Wind may one day play a useful role in our nation's energy grid, but today, wind is totally incompatible with the ICC's mission to ensure the provision of adequate, efficient, reliable, safe and least-cost public utility services.

-- Dan Miller, publisher, the Heartland Institute, Chicago, chairman of the Illinois Commerce Commission (1994 to 1999)

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