

Will Arizona dodge rapid shift to renewable energy?

USA TODAY NETWORK Brandon Loomis, The Arizona Republic 8:14 p.m. EST February 11, 2016

PHOENIX — Arizona's federally mandated shift to cleaner but costlier power could be slowed by a Supreme Court decision to halt the federal Clean Power Plan's implementation while it considers the plan's legality.

The court's decision raised cheers from Arizona officials and utility regulators, but disappointment from those fearing the worst effects of climate change and air pollution.

The plan uses the Clean Air Act to regulate greenhouse gas emissions and slow climate change. The court voted 5-4 on Tuesday to keep the plan from taking effect until justices can rule on the Environmental Protection Agency's authority to enforce it. That consideration is expected to take months.

(Photo: Patrick Breen/The Republic)

"The EPA should not be in the business of setting energy policy using the guise of reducing carbon emissions," Arizona Corporation Commission Chairman Doug Little said in a written statement. "Implementation of this rule would have cost Arizonans billions of dollars and would have wreaked havoc on rural communities that rely on (coal) power generation."

He said electric ratepayers could expect to pay 10% more for power if the plan goes forward.

Environmentalists pushing for climate-friendly energy sources feared a final decision against the plan could make Arizona less livable in the future.

"This is a plan that should be happening as quickly as possible," said Kevin Dahl, Arizona program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association.

The EPA rule "mitigates climate-disrupting pollution" that has social and health consequences as well as an effect on Colorado River water supplies, he added.

"We hope that (the court) will find the law to be valid."



Terry Edwards, a supervisor at the Navajo Generating Station, looks out at the facility. *(Photo: Patrick Breen/The Republic)*

Fossil fuels — natural gas followed closely by coal — account for more than two-thirds of Arizona's electrical generation, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Nuclear provides another 24%, while renewables including hydropower and solar add the rest.

The state ranks 14th in population and 21st in carbon emissions.

The likely effect of the Obama administration's plan, if the court ultimately allows it, would be a major reduction in coal burning and an increase in solar power and perhaps natural gas generation. The state objected strenuously when the government announced the plan two years ago, saying the required 52% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions was steeper and costlier than surrounding states' mandates.

The federal government adjusted Arizona's required reductions to 34% last year, and allowed a 15-year transition. The original plan sought most reductions by 2020.

Still, the Arizona Corporation Commission sued last fall, joining 27 states that called the rule an overreach of authority by the EPA.

Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich, whose office partnered with the Corporation Commission on the challenge, called the federal rule an "abuse of power" and "regulation without representation."



Evaporated water leaves the tops of stacks at the Navajo Generating Station near Page. (Photo: Patrick Breen/The Republic)

"This is a tremendous step in stopping the Obama administration's unconstitutional mandates and protecting Arizona jobs and ratepayers," Brnovich said.

Renewable energy supporters point out that solar and other technologies are coming down in price, and that deploying them could generate new jobs. The Sierra Club, which has battled to reduce coal power, released a statement calling President Obama's vision a "job-creating, life-saving" plan.

That may be true, but it doesn't mean renewable energy will cost less than fossil fuels do, Arizona State University economist Tim James said. Money spent on rooftop solar or other systems is money not spent at restaurants or the movies.

"I'm all for renewables," James said. "I just think you have to be honest in telling the story. It costs more."

Beyond direct energy costs, though, James said a transition like that envisioned in the federal plan would help prevent social disruptions such as mass climate-driven migrations, or worse. Arizona is fortunate to have some flexibility from its solar potential, he said.

"We should just face up to the fact that it's more expensive," he said. "If we don't, we won't be around in 50 or 100 years anyway."

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