

## TODAY'S DEBATE: BIG STONE II POWER PLANT

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WHAT SHOULD BE THE ROLE FOR COAL?

Embrace wind power, make coal part of history

BY ROSS HAMMOND

Mercury pollution in our lakes, rivers and streams is a real threat. Burning coal for electricity releases mercury into the air, which lands in our water and is absorbed by the fish and then by our bodies when we eat the fish. Mercury is toxic and builds up in our bodies. More than 10 percent of South Dakota counties have fish consumption advisories because of mercury contamination. We don't have to add more to that list.

Big Stone II executives argue that it's OK to dump mercury into the air because it's a few hundred pounds. That's unacceptable. I should know: I was a utility executive for more than 20 years with Northern States Power, now Xcel Energy. I know that it's time to make the transition to a clean, renewable and more efficient energy system for the 21st century.

Moving away from coal is about economic common sense and creating a secure future for generations to come. Mercury pollution in our water, global warming pollution in our air, and outdated technology is not the way our region should be headed. We saw how unstable the coal supply was last spring when the Big Stone I plant couldn't get the Wyoming coal it depends on, and as a result, customers' utility bills skyrocketed. So why rely on others for what South Dakota can produce itself? Why rely on outdated technology that even the CEOs of the largest energy companies such as Shell, British Petroleum and Duke Energy are saying doesn't make economic sense?

We know better than this. We know that Big Stone II is more of the same. More of the same pollution, same old technology, and same overdependence on one source of energy that has to be shipped in from out of state. The projected cost of Big Stone II has increased by 50 percent in the last year, with experts now projecting that its power would be considerably more expensive than power from wind. It's time for a change. It's time to leave the past behind and embrace a new future of renewable, homegrown energy. The price of electricity from wind will remain affordable into the future, no matter what happens to fossil fuel prices.

South Dakota has already taken advantage of its vast biofuels resources, like ethanol. That's a step in the right direction; local energy strengthens local economies, creates jobs, and reduces our over-dependence on faraway sources of energy. But there is more.

South Dakotans are missing huge opportunities to harness the wind power literally knocking on their front door. South Dakota is the fourth best state in the nation for wind power, but has developed this resource less than any other state in the Upper Midwest. Wind energy is clean energy that produces no mercury pollution and no global warming pollution. I know that many utilities are looking toward the future and partnering with communities to develop renewable, nonpolluting sources of energy.

Big Stone II's defense of mercury pollution is not a discussion we should be having in the 21st century. The executives of Big Stone II must come back to the public with a plan for renewable, homegrown energy that doesn't involve mercury or global warming pollution. Without that, Big Stone II should be lost to the wind.

About Hammond

Ross Hammond is a management consultant with R.D. Thomas & Associates. He has worked for numerous energy and utility companies, including five years as the corporate director of Environmental Regulatory Affairs for Northern States Power Co. (now Xcel Energy). He is a registered professional electrical engineer and holds a mini-MBA from the Minnesota Management Institute at the Carlson School of Business. He is vice chair of the board of directors of Fresh Energy - a regional nonprofit working for renewable energy, energy efficiency and global warming solutions.

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