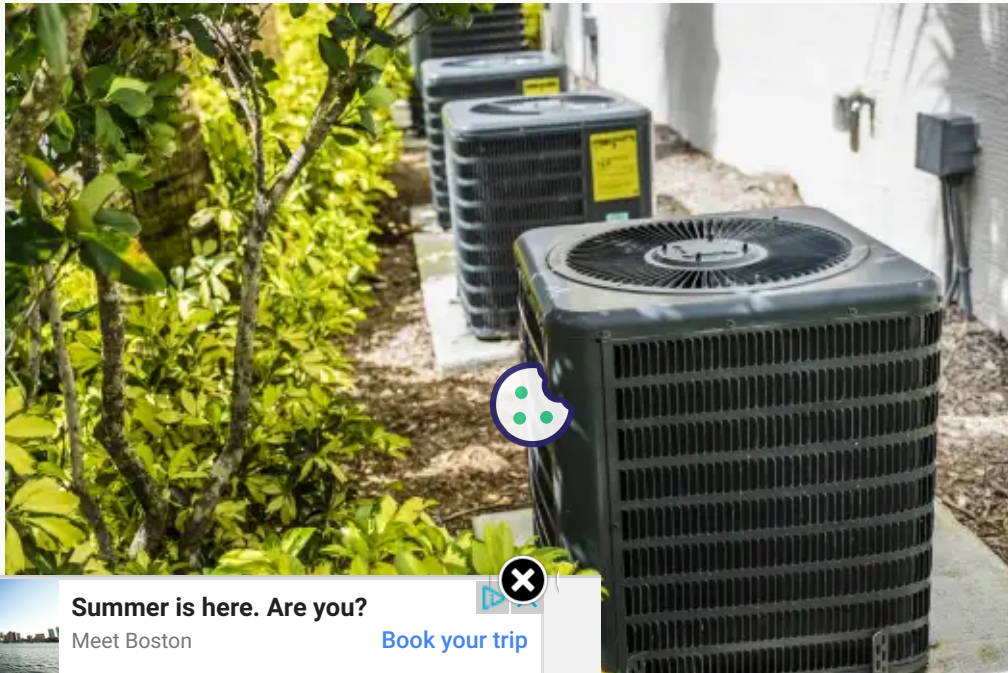


OPINION

Brown: Reliability must take top priority in energy policies



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The North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC), in May said two-thirds of the country is at risk of failure this summer in prolonged heat. New England's grid faces an elevated blackout risk, NERC said. (Photo Metro Creative Services)

By **MARC BROWN** |

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Commissioners of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and a host of stakeholders convened on June 20 to discuss the cost and reliability of New England's electricity. In some respects, this is the "Groundhog Day" of energy policy events because this meeting was the latest in a decade of similar meetings, and it's déjà vu all over again.

While the tone of the meetings may change, the meat of the discussions never do — New England's energy rates and energy costs are routinely among the nation's 10 most expensive and every year, the electric grid's reliability becomes a bigger concern.

Ordinarily, the grid is not on the public radar, but disastrous failures in California and Texas in recent years have put it there, and not a moment too soon. Gordon van Welie, the CEO of New England's grid operator ISO-NE, painted a slightly less dire reliability picture than in years past, while the steward of the nation's grids, the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC), in May said two-thirds of the country is at risk of failure this summer in prolonged heat. New England's grid faces an elevated blackout risk, NERC said.

And make no mistake, Van Welie still has concerns, stating: "I'm not feeling sanguine about the risks ... In the short run, I'm feeling a little more relaxed but in the long run, I'm as concerned as I've ever been."

Hopefully, elected officials and other stakeholders listen to Van Welie's concerns, and related ones from FERC Commissioner Mark Christie, who said New England's electricity markets are built in a way that makes it hard to "deliver just and reasonable rates to consumers and promote reliability." In layman's terms, this means that electricity rates may be too expensive for FERC to approve.

Despite these reliability warnings and costs concerns, New England states continue to mandate and subsidize the electrification of the heating and transportation sectors before there is enough new generation — most likely from wind, solar and hydroelectricity — at the ready to meet the region's already-growing demand and the surge of it that will come as more electricity is required.

Policies that empower families and businesses to choose from products like air-sourced heat pumps or natural gas to heat their homes and businesses are a good thing. What isn't good is forcing the mass adoption of anything before we are sure it can withstand our tough winters, or our grid can handle the stress of new electricity demand.

Knowing this, why would Massachusetts consider expanding its current 10-municipality pilot program that allows some towns to ban natural gas, propane and other fuel-powered appliances in new construction? If having enough power to keep the lights on and heat people's homes is a question mark, why experiment?

Few would dispute the fact that nearly all of the generation that will come online in New England in the near future will be from renewables. But we cannot afford to do it in a manner that delivers unaffordable, unreliable energy via hastily crafted mandates that put in place nice, round-number deadlines with no relation to a realistic timeline. These plans will neither help the environment nor people's wallets. And we know many of these projects are facing delays or cost issues, both risks to reliability.

The time for feckless forums organized under the auspices of "doing something" while ignoring the realities of policy proposals needs to come to an end.

Pandering to small, vocal constituencies is not only damaging electricity reliability but will also increase our already high electricity bills, something those on low-and fixed incomes can least afford. Considering that 60% of Americans don't have \$500 in the bank, that's a lot of people.

Elected officials need to be honest with the public about the financial and technical feasibility of their energy policies, and we must adopt a smarter plan about how and how quickly we change our energy mix without adequate backup.

Let's not wait for blackouts or for lives to be lost before policymakers get the message — just in time for them to point fingers at everyone but themselves for the unreliable, expensive electricity their policies created.

Marc Brown is New England Executive Director for Consumer Energy Alliance

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