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Tennessee gobbles up energy

DESPITE HEAVY USE, TVA RETURNS FOCUS TO CONSERVATION

By ANNE PAINE • Staff Writer • June 1, 2008

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TVA, once one of the most conservation-oriented utilities in the country, abandoned its innovative ways in the 1980s and is only now returning to a major focus on energy efficiency.

As a result of the decades-long lag, Tennesseans use more residential electricity per person than any other state except Alabama. In contrast, utilities in several other parts of the country have embraced efforts to reduce electricity use by customers, leapfrogging TVA and offering a wide array of programs designed to save energy.

ADVERTISEMENT For example, the city-run electric utility in Austin, Texas, put measures in place over the past 25 years that saved more electricity than a new power plant would generate.

In contrast, TVA continued on a nuclear power spending program, approving \$2.5 billion last year to complete a new nuclear reactor at Watts Bar in East Tennessee. It spent \$1.8 billion to restart another nuclear unit last year in Alabama. The agency also paid out \$1 billion last year to buy electricity outside its own grid.

Only after committing billions to increasing nuclear power has the agency made a serious pledge to promote efficiency as part of its overall strategy. And the \$36 million it has set aside this year to do so is only a fraction of the amount going for more nuclear power.

The agency insists there's no way around the need for more power, but concedes it needs to concentrate on energy efficiency and reducing demand in combination with its nuclear program.

"Relative to what's going on in the rest of the country, we are behind," said TVA's Joe Hoagland, who was named vice president of energy efficiency and demand response last fall. "But we haven't had the price and reliability issue that some places have."

There was little incentive

That lack of emphasis on conservation is evident, especially for those who have lived elsewhere.

"There doesn't seem to be any kind of awareness — period — except for small pockets of people throughout the city who in some cases did live somewhere else and brought that awareness to Nashville," said Judy Wilson, of East Nashville, who owns a Web development company. She lived in environmentally conscious San Francisco for 17 years.

Why has TVA been largely missing from the conservation game? The agency — like most utilities — had little incentive to encourage consumers to use less power.

Until recent years the TVA had enough inexpensive, reliable power, and revenues were needed to pay for expenses, planning and the more than \$20 billion owed for power plant construction.

"If you see yourself as a cranker of electricity as opposed to a provider of energy services, then you have a whole different way of looking at what would benefit your customers," said John Laitner, director of economic analysis for the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy. "You need to diversify to include efficiency as well as supply."

Tenn. vs. other states

A look at how Tennessee compares with other states in electrical use is one way of gauging how the state and the TVA have faltered on the conservation front.

Tennessee uses about a quarter more residential electricity per person, on average, than Texas, for instance, according to research by the California Energy Commission.

From the late 1970s to 2005, Tennessee's per-person residential electricity use jumped 25 percent. The state is in a region where air conditioning use is heavier, which can account for some, but not all, of the differences state to state.

In contrast, California's residential electricity use rose just 5 percent per person during that same period. Though the California economy grew, the state never stopped pushing for conservation after the 1970s national energy crisis. California also is one of several states, including Texas and Vermont, that have begun requiring utilities to find ways to manage and slow increasing power use.

But TVA is different: Because it's an independent, self-supporting federal agency, the state government couldn't mandate it to act even if it wanted to. The state legislature asked — by way of a non-binding resolution last year — that the agency make a major investment in energy efficiency.

In the past year, the TVA board has — coincidentally or not — committed to reducing carbon and energy use by its customers and itself. The goal is a 1,400-megawatt reduction in peak electricity use within five years. That's more energy than a new nuclear reactor would produce and enough for more than 650,000 homes. And TVA last month set a goal of generating half its power from low- or non-carbon-producing sources by 2020.

The contrast with several states, however, is stark. At least 20 are already viewing energy reductions and time-of-day management of power demand as a low-cost, clean energy resource. Utilities have set up programs that include offers such as rebates for "cool roofs" that can reduce air conditioning use by 10 percent to 20 percent, and free home energy audits by professionals.

Vermont, a major conservation leader, established an independent "efficiency utility" in 2000. Its voluntary programs and incentives, which include rebates for more efficient light bulbs and appliances, have stopped growth in electricity use there and have saved homes and businesses \$31 million.

"If that can be done here, it can probably be done other places," said Blair Hamilton, executive director of Efficiency Vermont.

One of the country's more aggressive programs was built in fast-growing Austin over the past 25 years. Rebates and incentives cover everything from solar screens to efficient refrigerators and zero- and low-interest loans for making a home energy efficient.

"It's cheaper for us in most cases to meet growth and demand through efficiency rather than building plants," said Matt Watson, policy director for Austin Mayor Will Wynn.

Residents have been able to put in a \$20,000 solar energy system for \$5,000 because



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Three windmill turbines sit atop Buffalo Mountain in Oliver Springs, Tenn., in 2000. The Tennessee Valley Authority has put up several windmills and solar panels and is generating some electricity from methane. But taken together, those projects generate less than 1 percent of its power.

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GIF: Residential use state by state

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Residential consumption of kilowatts per person as of 2005

Biggest electricity users

Alabama 6,898

Tennessee 6,868

S. Carolina 6,739

Smallest electricity users

California 2,379

Hawaii 2,496

New York 2,623

SOURCE: California Energy Commission

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