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LONG TERM ENERGY OUTLOOK

While the Public Service Commission is still studying Michigan's long-term energy outlook, the North American Electric Reliability Council said the prospects for the nation as a whole are not good in the coming years. The NERC, now legally charged with developing and enforcing reliability standards in the United States and working to achieve those same powers in Canada and Mexico, projected in a report released Monday that the Midwest would be one of six regions that would see power demand encroach into reliability margins in as little as two years. And it found that demand would outpace new power supply by more than triple nationally over the next 10 years at current rates.

A Public Service Commission spokesperson commented that the commissioners and staff were studying the report and would likely consider its findings as they prepare a similar report for Michigan due out by the end of the year. But in its most recent report, the PSC did find that there would be enough power in the state to avoid power shortages over the next year.

NERC found that nationally, electric demand will grow 19 percent over the next decade, but supply will grow only 6 percent and transmission capacity less than 7 percent. Canada, the group said, was in slightly better shape with demand projected at 13 percent and supply projected a 9 percent, but still a deficit. Canada faces a stiffer power movement problem, with transmission projected to grow only 3.5 percent. For the Midwest, or the Reliability First Corporation region, the regional transmission organization that covers most of Michigan, the report estimated that demand would encroach on its 15 percent reliability margins by 2008 and would surpass uncommitted power plants, either in planning or construction, by 2013. For the parts of the Upper Peninsula covered by the Midwest Reliability Organization, reliability margins would be reached by 2009, but uncommitted power could carry the region past 2015.

There will be additional generation capacity built on top of what utilities are planning, with the NERC expecting uncommitted resources to double over the next decade. It also warned there is not sufficient emergency transmission capacity to move that power where it may be needed.

LOWER HEATING COSTS EXPECTED

Though the actual weather will determine whether residents spend more or less on their heating, they will pay some 12 percent less per unit of natural gas and .8 percent less for electricity than they did last winter, the Public Service Commission said in its annual Michigan Energy Appraisal. Those using heating oil are already paying some 16 percent less than last year. The commission expected there would be sufficient fuel supply, from all sources, to get residents through the coming winter and to keep prices below the hurricane-induced spikes of last winter. Though prices for fuels will be lower, the PSC warned in its report that last winter was warmer than expected and much of the savings could be absorbed by heating needs of a return to colder temperatures. But it also acknowledged the National Weather Service was predicting another warm winter.

For low-income residents having difficulties paying their heat bills, the commission announced an expansion of the Winter Protection Plan in place last year. The new voluntary agreement with utilities allows shut-off protection for those earning 200 percent or less of poverty, up from 150 percent last year. The protection also is expended beyond the statutory December 1-March 31 period to include the month of November.

EMBRYONIC STEM-CELL LEGISLATION

Missouri is the only state with an embryonic stem-cell proposal on its ballot this November, and if citizens there approve the measure organizations in other states like Michigan may move to put the issue on ballots in 2008. Embryonic stem-cell research certainly has already become the topic of conversation not only at the national level, but also in Michigan, where the Governor has urged the Legislature's action on bills to allow for that type of research, relaxing current laws that prohibit it. Michigan's statute is considered to be one of the strictest in the nation.

Legislation that would lift the state's ban has seen a hearing before the House Health Policy Committee, but has received no action since March. And similar Senate bills introduced in that chamber are not likely to see a hearing until after the election, the Senate Health Policy Committee chair has said. While control of the Legislature and governor's office will certainly have an effect on whether Michigan's law is relaxed in the future, some are saying that the outcome of Missouri's ballot proposal could be the tip of the iceberg on the embryonic stem-cell movement.

The ballot proposal in Missouri would amend the state's Constitution to allow patients in the state to have access to embryonic stem-cell therapies and provide that researchers could conduct "any research permitted by federal law," but would not designate state funds to it, according to the publication Stateline.

Recent formation of the 501(c)3 organization Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures is evidence of the embryonic stem-cell research movement in Michigan according to a spokesperson for the Michigan Catholic Conference. But Marcia Baum, executive director for Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures, said that the formation of their group has nothing to do with what may or may not be on Michigan's ballot in 2008. "Our mission is strictly to educate organizations and citizens about the facts related to the science, the potential for treatment and cures and what can and can't be done with the laws in the state," she said.