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MY VIEW DANIEL BAKER

Renewable energy is needed — and now

By Daniel Baker

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I live in Santa Fe County, and I want 100% clean renewable energy as close as I can get it to my house.

Since the sun shines half the day, and I use electricity 24/7, I know there will have to be batteries in my house, or nearby, to capture and store daytime solar surplus and enable use throughout the night. Not everybody can have solar and batteries at their house, so we need utility-size solar with battery energy storage systems, or BESS, in Santa Fe County to meet energy demands at the lowest cost with the highest reliability and safety standards possible.

The good news is that national safety standards and certification exist for BESS. They have developed over the years to the point where there has not been a single fire, or any toxic material or gas, spread outside a BESS container certified to post-2022 UL-9540a standards installed in accordance with 2020 or later National Electric Code requirements.

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Unfortunately for us all who would love the benefits of 100% renewable energy and tax revenue in the county coffers for our roads and schools, there is a local group, the Clean Energy Coalition, or CEC. It is opposed to the AES-proposed Rancho Viejo Solar project, flooding the media with “concerns.” To me, they seem to be a confabulation of inaccurate, incorrect, unsupported and irrelevant statements.

- CEC claims high risk of fire from the project. However, national news coverage of actual events and federal databases tracking BESS fires show not a single fire has spread outside a modern BESS container in the United States. Risk of fire from a BESS facility is therefore lower than other trackable sources of ignition, including lightning, roadside car fires, cigarette butts, fireworks and regular house fires of various causes.
- CEC claims property insurance will go up. Considering that there has been zero property damage or loss of life from any modern BESS container fire, I don't see the connection.
- CEC claims danger from toxic smoke and gases if fires ignite. Yet local network news coverage of a September fire in California at a pre-2022 facility revealed that Environmental Protection Agency measurements taken on-site during the fire determined that smoke contained only particulates similar to any structural fire and was not hazardous to fire response teams or to nearby residents. The BESS facility was back in operation 48 hours later.
- CEC claims the need for vast amounts of water to extinguish fires and high risk of PFAS — forever chemicals — contamination. Current regulations dictate that old formulations of PFAS foams no longer can be used in modern BESS containers. Since there are no banned PFAS in modern fire suppression systems, there will be no groundwater contamination. Additionally, current protocol for containing a BESS fire does not require much water because the goal is not to “extinguish,” but to spray just enough water around a container to cool adjacent containers for about 24 hours. That prevents nearby containers from igniting; that's why there would be a 30,000-gallon cistern of “regular” water on-site in the proposed AES project.

I would suggest to anyone having concerns that they do a little independent research on how many fires have spread outside a modern (post-2022) BESS facility in the United States and resulted in property damage or loss of life. I think you will be comforted to find there are none.

Daniel Baker is a longtime advocate for clean energy and transportation, and supports AES Rancho Viejo Solar as a great step in the right direction to reach our 100% renewable energy goals.