

At stake in the energy debate

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Published May 11, 2003

Mpls Star Tribune

The governor and Legislature have before them the most important health, safety, economic and energy decision of the decade -- perhaps the next 10 decades. Their actions on nuclear waste storage at the Prairie Island and Monticello plants will affect the future of all Minnesotans and all people downstream on the Mississippi River.

As a Catholic sister, I approach this issue with a different perspective. I believe we have a moral obligation to protect our water and our people for generations to come.

My plea to Minnesota's leaders:

First, be courageous and do what is right for the people and our earth. We are here for only a short time. Don't make a short-term decision.

This decision goes far beyond 2013 and 2014 when the current operating licenses at the Prairie Island plant expire. It goes far beyond 30 years, which is the length of time Xcel Energy officials would like to continue to operate its old and aging nuclear power plants. In fact, current proposals call for an unlimited number of nuclear waste storage casks to stay on the island on the Mississippi River or at Monticello, upstream from the Twin Cities' drinking water source -- forever. That is unacceptable.

There is no solution in sight for a permanent nuclear waste storage site. Experts say even if a permanent national nuclear storage agreement is reached, it may be 2062 before any nuclear waste would leave Prairie Island or Monticello.

Second, I ask our leaders to use this as an opportunity to plan our future with safe, renewable energy, like wind, solar and biomass. Any solution to the Prairie Island problem should include a requirement for power companies to generate a meaningful percentage of their energy using such methods by a certain date. In my opinion, that renewable energy standard should be 20 percent by 2020. We must set high goals, not easy ones.

Third, our leaders must remember their obligation to protect the people whose homes are immediately and directly threatened by a nuclear power plant in their back yard. The Prairie Island Indian Community should be compensated for the health and safety risks of additional storage casks erected next to their homes. Tribal members should have an opportunity to move, if they wish, to new land. Any Prairie Island agreement should include adequate land given to the tribe for relocation.

Some may wonder why I, as a Mankato resident and an advocate for rural Minnesota, care so passionately about an issue so far away. I care because I discipline myself to ask: What is best for all human beings? What is best for future generations? What is best for our planet?

In the few remaining hours of the 2003 legislative session, I ask that Gov. Tim Pawlenty and all Minnesota lawmakers look at the Prairie Island issue from the perspective of what is good for all.

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