

Missed Opportunity If Oregon Falls Behind on Clean Energy

By: Dewey Kennedy

Two qualities which make our communities strong are personal responsibility and neighborly cooperation. We do what we can to contribute. We take responsibility for our piece of what needs to be done. We clean up our own mess. Some problems are too big or we hit a rough patch. Our neighbors step in to help. We're stronger for working together.

I was born and raised in Gilliam County, where I'm proud to serve my community as Road Master and as a commissioner at the Port of Arlington. In my lifetime, I've seen a lot of changes. Only one winter in the last twelve have we had enough water. People have to drill deeper wells. Our aquifers are drying up. The winters are too warm. There's not enough snow in the mountains to feed our water sources.

My wife's family had a ranch, 26,000 acres where they grazed cattle. The wildfires, which have gotten worse, damaged so much rangeland. Every blade of grass burned means less acreage for the cattle. You're forced to overgraze in other areas to keep up the herd. Wildfires are making things worse for our economy, land and health. Scientists predicted this would happen and now it's coming true.

We're facing a once-in-a-generation challenge and it's going to take responsibility and cooperation to solve. For previous generations it was fighting dictators in Europe. For us, it's combatting a warming climate. I believe this is a global problem. I'm pleased to hear things about China and Europe starting to pull some of the weight. But if the U.S.A. really kicks in with renewable energy, no country in the world can beat us. We have economic freedom here. The world would see us as an example.

Oregon is a prime place to show others how it's done, while boosting our homegrown economy. I've seen Gilliam County and our neighbors lifted up thanks to the wind farms, creating jobs and bringing in revenue for counties and towns. When I'm building roads, I'm making them as straight as I can so the trucks carrying new wind turbines have an easy time coming in.

Now's the time for more investment in renewable power, in making buildings and homes use less energy, and to think about how we can use better fuels, made here at home. I'm following this cap-and-invest legislation in Salem called "Clean Energy Jobs".

The idea is Oregon will put a "cap" on climate pollution from the largest sources in our state, about 100 of them. We'll ask those industrial polluters to take responsibility for what they're putting into our air by paying a fair price for it. Those funds will be invested in communities all around the state -- in clean energy like solar, upgrades to homes and businesses to save on energy bills, and projects to battle against drought and prevent wildfires.

Like with the wind farms, all this new work requires people to do it. It's the kind of work that can't be outsourced -- construction workers, electricians, engineers and more. A project means hiring local truckers, more business for the hardware stores and restaurants. This legislation could mean more funding to jumpstart those projects.

Up at the Port of Arlington, we're developing a building to attract businesses. We'd like to put solar panels up because the electricity bill will be much lower. It's not in the budget right now, but with Clean Energy Jobs we could fund those improvements. At the landfill in Arlington, as things decompose, we're pulling methane gas off and making electricity from it -- more power than the whole county needs! These clean energy funds can help turn landfills, dairy operations, and water treatment plants into energy generators. Irrigation equipment upgrades for farmers can help save water and energy, protecting us from drought.

Long term, if we're using energy made closer to home, it's going to be cheaper and more reliable. I hear the other side of this debate too. Folks worried about 'will this be a burden on the economy?' and the like. I plan a budget at the road department. I know prices for energy go up and down, mostly out of our control. You plan for those as best you can. We need to set ourselves up for the future.

I'll be watching closely. This bill needs to invest in all communities, not just the Portland area. I hope to see guarantees that rural counties will get our fair share, and some help because we don't always have the staff to do the paperwork. I need to see protections for large businesses under the cap to stay competitive. And we should join up with other states, so it doesn't create a new bureaucracy.

Oregon needs to do its part. We might not grow enough wheat to feed the whole world; but we grow wheat in Oregon anyway because we contribute to the market. The Clean Energy Jobs bill is an economically smart way to create jobs, reduce pollution, and save money on energy while we become more independent. For our community to thrive, we need new industries and protection against the changing climate. This is a balanced solution.

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