Editorials
The Seattle Times

Natural gas still crucial to the WA grid; utilities need to coordinate

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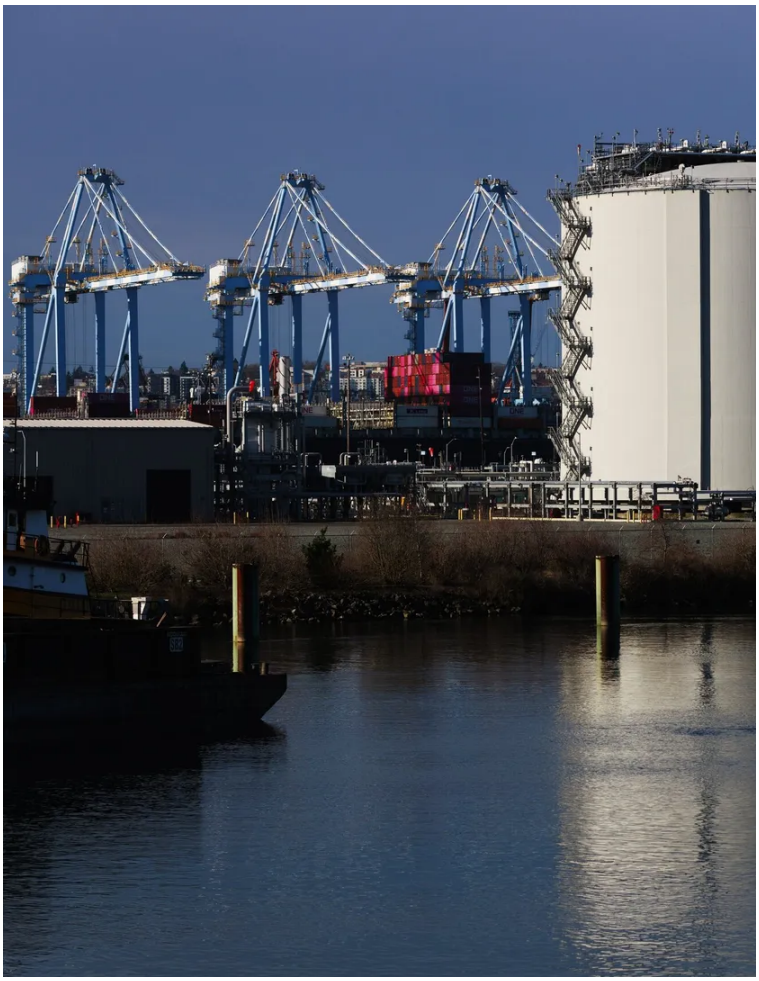

Pictured is Puget Sound Energy's liquified natural gas facility at the Port of Tacoma. (Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times, 2024)

By The Seattle Times editorial board

To understand how energy flows to every Pacific Northwest community, think of your Thanksgiving dinner. Hydroelectric dams bring the turkey, though it's a leaner bird than in years past. Renewable sources like wind turbines, solar panels and batteries provide increasingly sizable sides but are still too meager to satisfy the group.

Natural gas is currently the mashed potatoes — a calorie-rich starch that multiple relatives often bring. No matter how voracious the appetite, those potatoes have been keeping your growing family's bellies full.

Trouble is, no one has been collaborating on who's bringing those taters, and

how many are needed. Without planning, there is the increasing likelihood that some at the table will go hungry in the future.

That's roughly how things stand among electricity generators, natural gas suppliers, policymakers and dozens of utilities across the region. Long a fuel supplying heat directly to homes and businesses, natural gas has become an increasingly crucial contributor to the electric grid.

Meanwhile, the Northwest's energy demand is skyrocketing. The Northwest's combined electricity needs are predicted to grow by 7,800 average megawatts, to 31,600, within a decade. That's equivalent to adding seven Seattle-sized cities to the grid, according to the Pacific Northwest Utilities Conference Committee.

On the supply side, hydroelectric power generation has been falling as climate change spurs drought and diminished snowpack needed to turn dam turbines. Under the state's clean energy transition, solar and wind will increasingly mix in. But they can't do it alone. When the sun isn't shining or the wind blowing, other on-demand sources like natural gas will backstop the grid. More green sources are coming — longer-term battery storage, smaller nuclear power plants, geothermal and more — but they're likely still a decade from deployment.

The problem is now. And natural gas is the resource that will bridge the gap. It already provides nearly a fifth of Washington's electricity needs.

Despite its pertinence, too little planning occurs between gas providers and electricity utilities — which are both reliant on the fuel.

To address the challenge, PNUCC and the Northwest Gas Association helping host the first-ever symposium that will bring gas and electric industry leaders together on Thursday in Portland. The trade groups are mapping out options to ensure there's an adequate supply of energy, particularly on the hottest and coldest days of the year when needs are highest. This is important work that Washington policymakers should strongly encourage and support.

Combined planning led California to better integrate gas and electric systems starting in 2023. The result has created strategic reliability reserves for natural gas in that state, and coordinated a boom in battery storage facilities to ensure the lights stay steady and affordable during peak load events.

Eventually, natural gas, as a greenhouse gas-emitting electricity source, will be phased out as part of Washington state's clean energy transition. But today, it's an integral ingredient in the state's energy mix.

Electricity and gas utilities should be talking to each other, planning together and ensuring there's enough megawatts and gas to power the Northwest's future. Only then can we have confidence the lights will stay on during the real Thanksgiving dinner, no matter how cold the temperatures outside might be.

***The Seattle Times editorial board**: members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Melissa Davis, Josh Farley, Alex Fryer, Claudia Rowe, Carlton Winfrey and William K. Blethen (emeritus).*

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