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Golden State's green path

Florida should adopt California's energy-efficiency model

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The backers of nearshore oil drilling want Floridians to think their scheme is the only way to meet energy demands and finance investments in alternative sources, such as solar.

California's experience says otherwise.

California has done a lot of things wrong to tarnish its image as the Golden State, but it has taken the right approach to going green, according to a first-rate article by Ronald Brownstein in the October issue of *The Atlantic* magazine.

Under Democratic and Republican governors, California has done what Florida has failed to do -- reduce per-capita energy consumption, create markets for alternative energies and attract huge amounts of private capital for research and development.

California, Brownstein wrote, "emits only about half as much carbon per dollar of economic activity as the rest of America. It generates significantly more electricity than any other state from non-hydroelectric renewable energy sources like solar, wind, and biomass. California registers more patents associated with clean energy than any other state and attracts most of the venture capital invested in U.S. 'cleantech' companies exploring everything from electric cars to solar power generation."

Among the most frequent arguments used by proponents of increased reliance on fossil fuels for energy is that conservation and the development of alternative sources won't meet the demand for power.

"The California Experiment," as Brownstein's essay is titled, provides compelling evidence to contradict those claims.

The "initial lesson from California's energy experience," Brownstein stated, is that "efficiency is the foundation of any effort to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. As

California has learned, the most cost-effective way to replace coal or natural gas or petroleum isn't to rely on solar or wind or biofuels; it's to squeeze more work out of less energy."

Avoiding 24 power plants

Brownstein credited Art Rosenfeld, an 83-year-old physicist and member of California's energy commission, for advancing the state's cutting-edge record on helping consumers and businesses to do more with less. "Rosenfeld says the past generation's gains indicate the state can improve its energy intensity (the amount of energy required to produce each dollar of gross domestic product) by about 30 percent every decade."

What's more, the California Energy Commission has calculated that the state's efficiency standards avoided the need for 24 large-scale power plants.

Part of the strategy in California has been to change the perception of efficiency standards -- from burdens to benefits.

"Efficiency," Rosenfeld states, "seems to be a renewable resource."

California and the United States have picked a lot of the low-hanging fruit in the efficiency field -- for example, establishing efficiency requirements for big household appliances, such as refrigerators. But additional, beneficial steps can and should be taken.

The proliferation of consumer electronics in the home -- computers, flat-panel TVs, cell phones and more -- is the "fastest-growing source of power demand in the world," Jad Mouawad and Kate Galbraith reported in *The New York Times* (published in the *Herald-Tribune*, Sept. 20).

"Worldwide, consumer electronics now represent 15 percent of household power demand," the article said. That percentage is expected to triple over the next 20 years, according to the International Energy Agency.

In the United States, the average American household has 25 consumer electronics products, compared with just three in 1980. Consider that a 52-inch plasma or LCD television uses more electricity than the biggest refrigerators -- in some cases significantly more.

The California Energy Commission is expected to approve new standards for televisions that would cut their power use in half by 2013; Florida should do the same. Both states should urge Congress to enact national efficiency standards for all consumer electronics as part of a new "renewable resource" strategy.

A Renewable Portfolio Standard

Florida should also follow California's example by passing laws that create a Renewable Portfolio Standard, or RPS.

Gov. Charlie Crist proposed an RPS but the Legislature hasn't given it the force of law -- a missed opportunity.

California's RPS requires the state's investor-owned utilities to generate 20 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2010 and 33 percent by 2020. The RPS has, in effect, helped create a predictable market that has attracted investment, research and development. Solar, for example, still provides only a small percentage of California's energy but the industry is growing -- much faster than in other states, including Florida, where a huge solar plant is being built in De-Soto County.

Brownstein quoted Mike Ahearn, chief executive of First Solar Incorporated, based in California: "There is a smattering of activity in other states ... but not what you'd call a marketplace with a recurring flow of opportunity. California is the solar market in the United States."

The experiment in California has also shown that the creation of markets creates constituencies. Environmentalists and businesses in California have, for example, forged alliances to promote -- and take positive advantage of -- opportunities to benefit commerce and the environment through energy efficiency and the development of renewable sources. (The emerging coalition of environmental groups and utilities, such as Florida Power & Light, in support of cap-and-trade legislation as a way to reduce carbon emissions shows how these alliances aren't limited to California.)

Brownstein's article recognizes the current limits of solar and other alternatives, and that not all of California's strategies would work in other states.

But the message is clear and compelling: "The big lessons of the California energy experience -- rely on efficiency first, use regulation to create markets, use markets to create constituencies, attack the problem from all angles -- might be implemented in different ways, but their basic principles can be applied everywhere."

Everywhere, that is, where state leaders and the public are willing to embrace the Golden State's green model.

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