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**Bozeman: Feb. 4 attend NorthWestern's public meetings on its 20-year plan**

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## **Bozeman:**

### **Join MEIC at NorthWestern Energy's Meeting on its Next 20-Year Plan on Feb. 4**

**Wed., Feb. 4, 5:30-7:30 p.m. at the Bozeman Library Community Room**



NorthWestern Energy is hosting public meetings across the state to gather input on [its latest draft Integrated Resource Plan \(IRP\)](#) before submitting the 20-year plan to the Public Service Commission (PSC).

Engaging in the development of the IRP is incredibly important as NorthWestern usually

tailors these plans to justify the most expensive and polluting power plant development – putting the burden on ratepayers who are already feeling the weight of increased bills.

**Help shape Montana’s energy future by attending the public meeting in Bozeman on Wed., Feb. 4 with MEIC!** The meeting will include a 20-minute presentation followed by time for public comments.

Ahead of the public meetings, MEIC hosted a webinar outlining our concerns with the IRP and how it can be improved. [You can watch the recording here.](#)

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**If you care about your energy bills, water, or the climate,  
we need you to show up to NorthWestern's meetings in  
Bozeman on Feb. 4.**

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## **About the IRP**

Under Montana law, regulated monopoly utilities such as NorthWestern Energy must prepare and submit to the Public Service Commission (PSC) an IRP every three years. These plans are supposed to detail how utilities plan to supply reliable and affordable electricity to their customers over the next 20 years.

NorthWestern Energy will be holding meetings to [gather public input](#) before submitting its IRP to the PSC, which will also hold public meetings and gather comments. This process begins at the end of January. ([See more details on our website.](#))

In the past, NorthWestern Energy has put its [thumb on the scale](#) in this process to justify expensive and unneeded power plant development – putting the burden on ratepayers who are already feeling the weight of increased bills.

The IRP is a modeling exercise to help plan an electricity generation mix that can keep the lights on during the most extreme weather days of the year. The information that NorthWestern uses to create its model (assumptions, inputs, constraints, and goals) have tremendous influence over the outputs the model generates.

**As an investor-owned, monopoly utility that spends money to build and maintain**

power plants and supporting infrastructure, charges ratepayers for those expenses, and then profits with up to a 10% return on investment, NorthWestern faces a perverse incentive to plan for an energy system that will make it the most money, not one that will be most affordable for Montanans. As such, NorthWestern's Draft IRP projects an energy system that prioritizes expensive and damaging coal and gas electricity generation plants, with extraordinarily expensive and unproven small modular nuclear reactors when the Colstrip plant retires in 2043, according to NorthWestern.

## OUR TOP PRIORITIES:

### 1. **Affordability and reliability.**

NorthWestern Energy has tipped the scales during this planning process in the past. MEIC wants to ensure that NorthWestern accurately models all available forms of generation – not biasing its analysis for expensive fossil fuels.



2. **Data centers.** NorthWestern Energy has indicated that attracting and serving large data center customers is a top priority. We need you to show up and remind NorthWestern that residential and small business ratepayers should be the utility's top priority – not catering to Big Tech.

3. **Nuclear.** NorthWestern is incentivized to build the most expensive power plants possible and earn a large profit on each dollar it spends. That means higher bills for customers but more profits for NorthWestern. This includes building expensive, experimental nuclear energy that is not yet available on a commercial scale and won't be for at least a decade, if ever.

4. **Gas plants.** As with nuclear, NorthWestern can make a huge profit by building expensive, unnecessary gas plants and raising customers bills to increase

shareholder returns.



5. **Markets and transmission.** NorthWestern should plan for upgrading and expanding transmission resources that will increase affordability and reliability for all its customers – and the entire region – rather than investing in expensive and unnecessary fossil fuel resources. NorthWestern should also be modeling the costs and benefits of joining one of two competing western energy markets.
  
6. **Climate impacts.** The [Montana Supreme Court ruled that our right to a clean and healthful environment includes a stable climate](#). NorthWestern is obligated to consider climate impacts in its 20-year plan.

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## Here are some of the major shortcomings we've identified in NorthWestern's IRP.

### Undervaluing Wind and Solar

NorthWestern has almost completely excluded low-cost wind and solar from its 20-year planning scenarios through arbitrary inputs, assumptions, and constraints. NorthWestern undervalues the ability for wind and solar to supply electricity during NorthWestern's peak electricity demand. NorthWestern exacerbates this undervaluation by ignoring solar and wind's ability to provide reliable and



complementary electricity when they are built together and combined with short- and long-duration energy storage. At the same time, NorthWestern drastically overestimates the reliability of its coal and gas resources, including [the Colstrip power plant](#).

Despite these fossil fuel power plants' [demonstrated equipment failures](#) and [fuel supply shortages](#) during [extreme weather events](#), NorthWestern continues to falsely assert that its gas and coal resources are nearly 100% available year round. The truth is that the old

and frequently broken Colstrip plant is available [only 51% of the time that it's needed most](#).

NorthWestern further undervalues wind and solar by tacking on exorbitant, unrealistic costs for connecting these resources to the grid, ignoring opportunities to take advantage of lower costs. The utility also ignores the ability to quickly develop these resources, with some [utility-scale wind](#) and [solar](#) projects going from construction to full commercial operation in under two years, compared to the five year minimum required to construct a gas plant.

Other model assumptions discount the value of wind and solar to the energy system even further, especially their ability to [replace retiring power plants](#). In particular, NorthWestern artificially constrains the amount of short- and long-duration energy storage it could build, hamstringing the ability of energy storage to boost the reliability of renewables in NorthWestern's portfolio.

### **Building for an Inflated Capacity Need**

NorthWestern's IRP model is structured to design a future energy system that can supply enough electricity to meet peak electricity demand on the most extreme days of the year. However, there are a lot of ways NorthWestern can define that goal; from putting its thumb on the scale for how much electricity it projects it will need to supply (i.e. will peak demand in 2045 be 1200 MW or 2200 MW?), to what avenues are considered for meeting that demand, NorthWestern has a lot of leeway.

Many utilities reduce peak electricity demand through focused [demand-side management](#) measures that reduce or shift certain electricity use during periods of peak demand. Smart meters, such as those installed by NorthWestern, can theoretically help facilitate this. However, NorthWestern doesn't take advantage of these tools, nor does it factor in the ability of interregional transmission to provide reliable access to electricity during peak events. Broader consideration of these factors would prevent NorthWestern from overbuilding its system just so it can have enough electricity for the couple of days a year when demand is highest. That strategy results in overbuilding expensive power plants that benefit its shareholders at the cost of Montana customers.

The IRP also fails to model the costs and benefits of NorthWestern's participation in [one of two competing energy markets](#) for coordinating energy trades during these high demand periods. What's more, NorthWestern has contracts with existing renewable energy resources in Montana but does not consider extending those contracts, instead planning to build expensive fossil and nuclear generation when those contracts expire.

And on top of everything, NorthWestern uses an outrageous “planning reserve margin” to say that it needs to build 21% more electricity capacity than it could ever need. And as NorthWestern kowtows to out-of-state data center developers, it sees an opportunity to inflate its energy needs even further.

### **Ignoring Climate Change**

Despite the increasingly apparent impacts of a changing climate on Montana’s energy system and NorthWestern’s constitutional obligation to maintain and improve a clean and healthful environment – including a stable climate – for present and future generations, no scenarios in the utility’s IRP modeling is in line with NorthWestern’s [Net Zero by 2045 Vision](#). This “vision” was nothing more than a PR stunt.



NorthWestern also doesn’t break down its portfolio greenhouse gas emissions by generation facility and neglects to conduct a social cost of greenhouse gases analysis to examine the true costs of its fossil fuel-reliant portfolios. While planning to continue exacerbating the climate crisis, NorthWestern includes no climate resiliency and adaptation planning in its IRP.

### **Limiting Transparency and Public Participation**

Despite MEIC’s ongoing efforts to guard and expand transparency and public participation in the IRP process, NorthWestern continues to provide as little transparency and public participation as possible.

When required to make its electric technical advisory committee (ETAC) meetings open to the public, NorthWestern made a mockery of public participation. The utility gave the public view-only access to these meetings, publishing cursory agendas and meeting minutes, and making meeting materials available weeks or months after a meeting took place. When required to take public feedback on its IRP development, NorthWestern created a feedback portal on its website for which there is no traceable impact to the final IRP’s development.

Despite the implementation of ETAC and the Stakeholder Work Group, there is no evidence that these groups had any substantive influence over the development of a least-cost IRP resource portfolio. Instead, these were forums for NorthWestern’s planning team to relay what the company’s executives had already decided to do. As a result, the final IRP does not represent a least-cost resource planning exercise, but instead a fossil-

fuel-guzzling cash-cow for NorthWestern's executives and shareholders, backed by performative pre-baked modeling outcomes that ignore low-cost resources such as solar and wind at the expense of our climate and our wallets.

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Check [our website](#) for more upcoming events.

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MEIC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan grassroots environmental advocate for clean water and a healthy environment for all Montanans. It was founded in 1973 to protect and restore Montana's natural environment.

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