Too Many People, Too Little Power

by Ric Oberlink

There are two components to California's energy crisis — the high price of energy and an insufficient supply of energy. The former has been dominating the recent news, but it is the latter that led to brownouts last summer and threats of more to come. Moreover, inadequate supplies are a cause of higher prices.

You may have read that California's power shortage is due to the increased demand of its booming economy and what one news article called "Silicon Valley's voracious appetite for electrical power." That is wrong. You may believe that Californians — with all their new computers, big-screen televisions, and gourmet appliances — are using more electricity. That, too, is wrong.

Per capita consumption of electricity in California has been flat for twenty-five years. In 1979, per capita consumption of electricity in the state was 7,292 kilowatt-hours. In 1999, it was down to 6,9952 kilowatt-hours. Twenty years of more gadgets, new toys, and bigger appliances yielded a five percent decrease in the per capita consumption of electricity.

So California should be in Fat City regarding energy supplies. We shouldn't need any new power plants. We should be able to shut down the dirtiest of the old plants because we're using less electricity. However, during that same twenty years the population of the state grew from twenty-three million to thirty-three million — a forty-three percent increase.

California doesn't have a power shortage. It has a population "longage." The power "shortages" — like traffic congestion, like sprawl, like the depletion of habitat for wildlife, like virtually every environmental problem in California — are due primarily to population growth.

Last year California grew by 571,000 people and now has a population in excess of thirty-four million. Its annual growth rate of 1.7 percent exceeds that of Bangladesh. We think of Europe as the crowded Old World and think of America, especially its West, as the land of wide-open spaces. Yet the population density of California already exceeds that of Europe and in thirty years it will exceed that of present-day China. Clearly, it's time to say "enough is enough."

Many people mistakenly think California's population has grown because people move here from other states. In fact, during the last decade more people moved from California to other states than migrated from other states to California.

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Most of the population growth in the United States is due to immigration. The baby boom of the '50s and '60s has been supplanted by the "immigration boom" of the '80s and '90s that continues today. According to the Census Bureau, two-thirds of future population growth will come from immigration. The proportion for California is higher still. California's immigrant population is almost nine million — a number exceeding the combined population of Norway and Costa

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Previously we worried about energy shortfalls only in summer when air conditioners were humming. Now we have experienced Stage Three power alerts — the highest level of energy emergency — in December and January. Yet politicians and media personnel have failed to identify the cause. People are not using more electricity — there simply are more people.

After brownouts last July, Pacific Gas and Electric proposed placing a floating power plant on San Francisco Bay. Environmentalists threatened to board and disrupt the floating power plant should it sail through the Golden Gate. The idea was scrapped.

Given the obvious connection between population growth and the demand for new power plants, you might think that environmental groups would emphasize stopping the state's population growth. They don't. Oppose new power plant construction? Sure. Oppose the population growth that causes it? Too controversial.

Fortunately, not all environmentalists are so timid. The late David Brower resigned last year as a director of the Sierra Club, in large part because of its failure to take a responsible position on population growth and immigration. "Overpopulation is perhaps the biggest problem facing us, and immigration is part of that problem," Brower said. "It has to be addressed."

In his State of the State address, Governor Gray Davis offered bold rhetoric, but nothing of substance, to address California's energy problems — long-term or short-term. He certainly didn't mention population growth in California. Let us hope that other leaders have more courage.

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[Author's addendum]

Since this piece was published, energy consumption figures for the year 2000 have been released — the year in which California began to experience electricity blackouts. The amount of power used per person in 2000 was 7368 kwh, one percent higher than the 1979 figure noted above. In the intervening years per capita consumption was a bit less.

It remains true, as stated above, that "per capita consumption of electricity has been flat for twenty-five years" and that the state's total electricity usage has increased with the increase in population.

Those per capita consumption figures include electricity from all sectors — residential, commercial, industrial, and agricultural. Residential usage consumes about thirty percent of the total. Lest the reader think that Californians are using all the electricity to run their hot tubs and gourmet appliances, note that California is forty-ninth in per capita usage of electricity and forty-seventh in per capita energy consumption among the states.

Investigations are currently underway as to whether power producers manipulated their production to cause shortages and increase the price and, if so, whether such activity was illegal. Whatever the outcome of those investigations, one should remember the price of a commodity cannot be manipulated if there is an abundance of the commodity. Prices can be manipulated only when demand exceeds supply. •

Electricity Consumption in California

Year	Gross Consumption (Gkh)	Population (000s)	Per Capita Use KWh
1969	111,468	19,711	5,655
1979	169,590	23,257	7,292
1989	204,139	29,218	6,987
1999	230,414	33,145	6,952

Source: 1960-1997 EIA State Energy Dat Report
1998, 1999 Electricity Consumption: EIA For, 826 estimates
1998, 1999 population: U.S. Bureau of Census