

# How to avert the looming power crisis

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By GLENN ENGLISH  
AND JACKSON E. REASOR JR.

WASHINGTON — The lights might go out in Virginia in two years. As a Washington Post editorial this fall and other reports have noted, blackouts are likely in the commonwealth by 2011 because demand for electricity is outstripping supply and the state needs access to new sources of power.

Sadly, Virginia's predicament can be seen around the country. The United States faces an energy crisis: More power generation and more transmission lines are needed, and all this must be created quickly while also meeting climate change goals.

Over the past few months, officials from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association have met with representatives from the 900 cooperative electric utilities that supply power to 40 million people in 47 states. A common theme has emerged: Our political leaders must develop a national energy policy that funds development of new technologies to keep electricity affordable while meeting climate change goals. Otherwise, a growing number of Americans won't be able to pay for power, and many will be at risk of rolling blackouts and brownouts.

In the past five years, utility bills have risen 30 percent, largely because of the rising cost of

fuel, mainly coal and natural gas. The country's leading consumer organizations, including the Consumer Federation of America and Consumers Union, recently wrote to President-elect Barack Obama, calling on him "to devote as much attention to the affordability of electricity as has been devoted to gasoline."

The U.S. Energy Information Administration forecasts that by 2030, demand for electricity will be 30 percent higher, the equivalent of adding four Californias to the power grid.

In some regions, demand will soon outstrip supply. The North America Electric Reliability Corp., which oversees the reliability of the U.S. electric power grid, projects that the desert Southwest will be at risk for blackouts in 2010 because of a shortage of power generation capacity. An Agriculture Department report this year on rural electric power generation found that "brownouts are probable unless investment in transmission is increased and simultaneously, energy efficiency efforts and demand side management must be intensified."

So what should Obama do to meet both our nation's growing demand for electricity and our climate change goals? The next administration should study the energy blueprint promoted by executives at cooperative electric utilities from around the country:

- The government should expand initiatives that boost effi-

ciency at the consumer level, such as the Energy Department's Weatherization Assistance Program, which helps consumers defray the cost of adding insulation, efficient windows, Energy Star appliances, and heating and cooling systems.

- Government policies should encourage the construction of new power lines so that wind power produced in rural areas can be dispatched to cities where it is most needed.

- Government must pare the red tape associated with building nuclear power plants.

- For real long-term progress, our leaders must invest in research so that we can find a way to capture and permanently store carbon emitted by coal-fired power plants. If we can pull off that feat, we could optimize our most plentiful fuel resource without increasing greenhouse gases.

Congress and President-elect Obama face a historic opportunity to tame our growing energy crisis. If they don't act, the lights will go out.

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