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May 26, 2009

Our View: Investors right to tell utility to green up

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- Idaho Statesman

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Shareholders have spoken truth to Idaho Power Co. They told the state's preeminent electric utility to green up - and ASAP. A shareholder resolution, passed Thursday, gives Idaho Power until Sept. 30 to spell out specific plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Good advice. And a favor disguised as a mandate. Shareholders are pushing Idaho Power to the vanguard of clean energy - which is exactly where the utility ought to be headed anyway.

Idaho Power has been going in this direction, but not quickly enough to suit the groups that successfully pushed the resolution. They recognized the tenuous situation facing Idaho Power - and, by extension, its 487,000 customers.

At a time when green power is becoming a national imperative, Idaho Power needs to find new sources of electricity. In 2008, the utility produced only 79 percent of its power in-house. And even though Idaho Power operates a string of hydroelectric plants along the Snake River, the utility remains tied troublingly to coal. The utility derives as much as 53 percent of its electricity from coal; the percentage varies, but goes up during drought years.

Idaho Power cannot continue to depend so heavily on coal. The utility must make the best use of the power its plants already produce, and must procure renewable power from wind, solar and geothermal plants.

The shareholders' resolution doesn't urge Idaho Power to move in a new direction. It simply but strongly urges the utility to move more aggressively.

And that's where the shareholders did Idaho Power a favor. This resolution should empower Idaho Power to make decisions that make sense for the company and for Idaho.

Conservation programs and green power production are best for the utility's long-term health. They will also best serve a state that must compete for jobs - while expanding an energy portfolio already struggling to meet existing demand.

There is a cost to change. Shifting to greener power would likely result in a rate increase. But, as the utility touted in a press release just last week, Idaho Power rates rank ninth lowest in the nation, and are the lowest among investor-owned utilities in the Northwest.

Inaction also is costly - and if shareholders don't urge Idaho Power to change its ways, then Congress very likely will. Federal legislation capping greenhouse gas emissions could drive up the cost of coal-fired generation; a House committee passed a version of this bill Thursday.

The issue comes down to timing. Does Idaho Power do the right thing now, or does it wait until later? Company officials have said they want to wait and see the final version of a climate change bill.

Backers of the resolution offered a better idea, urging Idaho Power to get out ahead of the ever-growing demand for renewable power. And they received a startling and unprecedented 52 percent vote of confidence Thursday; for the first time, shareholders urged an investor-owned utility to adopt a green power plan.

Now, Idaho Power must match the long-term vision of its investors.

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