



Guest Juice: Roadmaps, Dashboards, and Rearview Mirrors

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By Arthur O'Donnell

No one can say California lacks an energy policy.

We have so many energy policies from so many different levels of government established under so many past administrations that it's taken our major regulatory and market agencies two years just to sort them out.

This joint effort--involving unprecedented cooperation among the California Public Utilities Commission, the California Energy Commission, the Air Resources Board, the California Independent System Operator, the California Environmental Protection Agency, and the Governor's Office--goes under the title of California's Clean Energy Future.

Publicly announced in September 2010, the project began many months earlier. The initial products of this undertaking were an Implementation Plan and an Inter-Agency Roadmap, created with the goal of compiling and coordinating all of the various mandates, proceedings, and directives that guide the state's energy/environmental policy course between now and the year 2020.

Unfortunately, trying to read this roadmap might drive you right off the energy policy highway while attempting to navigate multiple timelines and milestones in tiny, tiny print. Although commendable for trying to fit as much information as possible onto a single web page or PDF sheet, this roadmap needs a GPS system.

Only slightly less unwieldy is the associated Implementation Plan, which takes 120 pages to describe the history and expectations for well over 50 initiatives and proceedings covering everything from traditional utility efficiency programs to speculative carbon capture and hydrogen generation schemes. And this is merely descriptive. For example, the section on cap-and-trade implementation is shorthanded to less than one page, while all the actual working documents, reports, comments, and litigation proceedings at the Air Resources Board could easily take up my spare laptop hard drive.

As a formal documentation, the plan is a valuable compendium; but it reads more like a history of General Motors than a user's manual for a Chevy Volt.

To their credit, the agencies have continued to work on ways to turn this complicated mess into something that even lawmakers might understand, boiling things down into a 10-page overview and trying to provide visual tools to tell the story of how to reach our "clean energy future."

Most recently released is a set of graphic representations that chart historic and projected trends in 16 functional areas that range from renewable energy installations and renewables portfolio standard compliance, to the expectations for job creation that result from all of these clean energy policies. These progress reports are now available for viewing on the California Clean Energy Future website: <http://www.cacleanenergyfuture.org/>

These 16 charts and graphs, of course, are just dashboard metrics, with each linking to a more detailed narrative with related charts and graphs that explore the data at a more "granular level", as statisticians might say. A 70-page, 6.5 MB compilation document puts all of the pieces together so that citizens and policy wonks alike can see where we've been, where we hope to go in the coming decade, and where we'd be if not for the policy efforts.

The expectation is that these dashboards will be updated on a regular basis, which is absolutely necessary. There is always a lag between reported data and our current situation. Having a steady stream of updated information and metrics helps turn this roadmap/dashboard into a valuable GPS--if not a voice activated navigation system.

As of this moment, though, we don't really know if or how well we are meeting most of the Future goals.

For the majority of the charts, we appear to be on a two-year-long frontage road between "actual" and "projected" results, with the dotted lines of effective policies pretty much the same as the trend lines for "business as usual" forecasts. Beginning this year and going forward, those roads are expected to diverge. But right now the dashboard metrics are most reliable as a rearview mirror.

As if you don't have enough to read, I'll recommend another recently issued regulatory review document that will be useful for anyone trying to make sense of California's market for renewable energy projects. I should say "markets" because this new 50-page report from the CPUC's Division of Ratepayer Advocates, called "The Renewable Jungle," documents a dozen California incentive programs and market-based systems to encourage development of renewable energy. They range from the state's implementation of the now-historic federal Public Utilities Regulatory Policy Act of 1978 for qualifying facilities (QFs) to the more recent renewable auction mechanism (RAM), plus many others.

Ratepayer Advocates is known to shout from its soapbox about the high cost of renewable energy contracts, but despite its name, the "Jungle" report is a comprehensive and fairly evenhanded review of these programs, with a particular eye to whether they contribute to the 33 percent renewables portfolio standard compliance mandate and what kind of policy issues they raise. (Note: Ironically, you might have to use a Google search to find the "Jungle" report, as it is not readily found on the commission's or Ratepayer Advocates' web sites.)

The only market Ratepayer Advocates missed, however, is the secondary market for stolen PV panels--believe it or not, that's one issue for which California has not yet established a policy.

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