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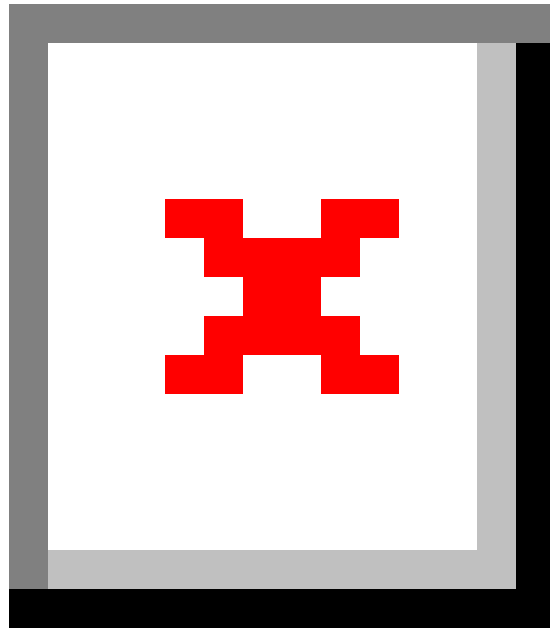
The Washington Post

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# Opinion Keeping the lights on in electricity-hungry America

March 13, 2024 at 4:30 p.m. EDT



The Covanta Energy incinerator in Montgomery County on April 8. (Robb Hill for The Washington Post)



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Regarding the March 10 front-page article “Amid explosive demand, America is running out of power”:

This article describes one possible future for the United States’ electrical grid — but not the only one.



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Buildings are the largest users of electricity, and over time, better construction standards have brought about progressive improvements in energy consumption. A home built to the 2021 International Energy Conservation Code, for example, uses 9 percent less energy than one built to the 2018 model code, which was itself a significant improvement on the 2015 model code. According to the U.S. Energy Department, those codes have saved and will continue to save an enormous amount of money for both individuals and businesses: as much as \$126 billion between 2012 and 2040. Better efficiency means fewer emissions, too: those savings are the equivalent of taking 183 million passenger vehicles off the roads or 245 coal power plants offline.

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Yet despite the potential for energy efficiency measures to achieve huge cost and emissions savings, both lawmakers and private companies have thrown up roadblocks. In Virginia’s recent legislative session, attempts to allow localities to adopt newer codes failed.

Environmental groups in Loudoun County, which contributes to the world’s largest concentration of data centers, have been pleading without success to require data centers to utilize energy efficiency measures, on-site renewable energy and energy storage. It’s a shame that politicians and regulators don’t appear willing to require the lowest cost approaches to address the potential overloading of the traditional electric grid. This will result in more power outages, extreme higher costs of electricity, increased use of dwindling fresh water and exponential increases in pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

**Scott Sklar**, *Arlington*

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*The writer is a sustainable energy director of George Washington University's Environment and Energy Management Institute.*

For all the attention given to the challenge of rising demand for electricity, this article paid puzzlingly little attention to the equally challenging dynamic keeping grid operators up at night: the rapid loss of existing coal-fired power plants.

That's a glaring omission because the loss of these plants is largely the direct result of a blitz of Environmental Protection Agency rules. Despite countless warnings from grid operators and the nation's reliability regulators that we must carefully manage the transition to new sources of energy or risk power shortages, the Biden administration is doing the opposite.

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The North American Electric Reliability Corp., which oversees the reliability of the nation's grid, warned in December of blackout risks for most of the country over the next decade. The leading causes: rising demand and the loss of 83 gigawatts of existing power plants, enough to power 60 million homes. That alarming assessment specifically warned against environmental regulations and energy policies "that are overly rigid" and jeopardize "the orderly transition of the resource mix."

Our current energy policy trajectory has us barreling toward an utterly avoidable and unnecessary electricity crisis. Americans deserve to know exactly what decisions are causing it.

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**Rich Nolan**, *Washington*

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*The writer is president and chief executive of the National Mining Association.*

Electricity demand is wildly exceeding projections, in part because of the recent resurgence in American manufacturing. The emergence of computing-heavy industries such as cryptocurrency mining and artificial intelligence is exerting a new and unexpected pressure on the grid. Public utilities and all levels of government must rein in these resource-hungry operations, perhaps by requiring them to build sources of renewable energy whenever they expand.

Regardless of what happens with crypto and AI, new sources of power must be connected to the power grid more quickly, and the grid must be renovated and strengthened. Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-Colo.) and Rep. Scott Peters (D-Calif.) introduced the Big Wires Act, which would require regional power systems to develop the capacity to transfer a specified percentage of their peak load to adjoining regions when needed. That transfer capacity would make the grid more resilient to extreme weather events. In addition, the cost of electricity would be lowered by increased access to low-cost resources such as solar and wind power.

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We must urge our members of Congress to support the Big Wires Act and other bipartisan legislation to improve the electrical grid and meet our country's growing demand for electricity.

**Linda DeLap**, *Morris Plains, N.J.*

I was alarmed when reports of excessive use of electricity in crypto mines came to light. Not only do crypto mines use enormous amounts of power, but agreements with some local utilities actually pay these mines to reduce their consumption during power shortages. Do utility companies pay hospitals, nursing homes, schools or businesses fines when the power goes out? No, they don't — so why pay companies that offer no meaningful service or product but are straining the grid?

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Now huge computing centers, owned by our largest corporations, are sprouting up in rural areas. They suck up enormous amounts of power, overwhelming local electrical systems and upending projections for future needs. They use vast amounts of green-house-producing fuels and dwindling drinking water to both operate and cool computers.

While people worry about AI outsmarting humans and taking over, I posit that they already have. We are allowing them unfettered use of our limited resources to the detriment of our planet and all who live here. We've chosen to cool computers for the sake of profit, rather than protect our future. If a rich man knocked on our doors and demanded all the food in our pantries and all the money in our savings accounts, would we give it to him? Apparently, we already have — and he wants more.

**Diane Love**, *St. Petersburg, Fla.*



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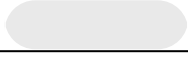
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