

OPINION

Georgians deserve bold action instead of habitual negligence

Georgia's policies are troubling testimony to the state's resolute negligence by propagating the use of fossil fuels.



Plant Scherer, a Georgia Power plant, is located near Juliette. (Elijah Nouvelage for the AJC 2021)

Tuesday, December 3, 2024

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As widely reported, this year's hurricane season provided conclusive verification of the disastrous downside of denying climate change and delaying actions to curb it. Earth scientists estimate that Hurricane Helene's rainfall was doubled by human-created climate disruption, causing record-breaking flood damage in the billions of dollars and costing more than 200 human lives. Scientific analysis of Hurricane Milton's winds and rains reached similar conclusions.

These tragic events follow a decade of increasing heat-related illnesses and deaths, crop failures, alarming decline in marine fisheries and devastating forest fires, generating an average of \$150 billion in annual U.S. damages according to the most recent reckoning.

In light of such trends and findings, Georgia's policies are troubling testimony to the state's resolute negligence by propagating the use of fossil fuels to generate electricity and subsidizing activities that increase demand for such dirty energy.

In contrast with more responsible states that are advancing clean energy and phasing out polluting power sources releasing heat-trapping emissions, within the past two years Georgia's Public Service Commission approved Georgia Power's expanded — and prolonged — burning of more fossil fuels to generate electricity for decades ahead. Moreover, it did so while PSC members falsely portrayed Georgia as progressive on green energy because the state sponsors manufacturers of solar panels, batteries, and electric vehicles, while failing to acknowledge the dirty energy being used by industrial operations subsidized under state

policies, including billions of dollars in tax credits, cheap land, and low-priced electricity.

Thanks to state tax credits that attract energy-hungry data centers, Georgia's self-created, dirty-energy predicaments will be accelerating.

Most Georgia Power residential customers, who have suffered an average 30% increase in monthly bills over the past two years, are unaware that they're helping to subsidize Georgia's industrialization — since, under PSC-approved policies, households pay far more per kilowatt-hour of electricity than industrial customers — 67% more, using the latest figures.

Those who are aware of this unjust imbalance in energy pricing are asking why residential customers are being forced to subsidize cheap and dirty power for industries, many of which also jack up property taxes despite degrading the quality of life in their communities.

To help speed the transition to legitimate, much-needed clean energy, a [State Climate Policy Dashboard](#) was created by the national nonprofit organization Climate XChange. The dashboard presents compelling comparisons of U.S. states in relation to their climate-action efforts. Its profile of Georgia identifies nine important energy policies that have not been enacted, though they have been adopted by many other states.

Among Georgia's neglected climate-friendly energy policies:

- [Clean energy and renewable portfolio standards](#);
- [Greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets](#);
- [Clean energy plans](#) (Georgia's only plan for reducing emissions omits the power sector and is voluntary);
- [Distributed generation/solar carve-out](#);
- [Energy storage targets](#); and
- [Coal phaseouts](#).

To address these policy deficiencies, key legislators should form a joint General Assembly study committee, with members from both the state Senate and House. Although the state has an ongoing study

committee looking into disaster mitigation and resilience, there is a conspicuous absence of any Georgia legislative initiative exploring the escalating causes of such hardships. Rather than developing legislation that only blunts the costly adverse consequences of disasters, the Legislature should diligently seek to eliminate state policies and practices that worsen them.

Such a study committee should seek answers to these critical questions:

- What are other states doing to reduce the emission of heat-trapping gases that are the cause of rising temperatures and worsening costs/impacts of climate change?
- How can state policies both reduce these causes of climate change and also prevent other damage to natural resources imposed by economic development?
- What existing state policies and practices are working against the public interest by shifting unjust impacts of development onto citizens and taxpayers — such as charging residential customers higher electricity fees?
- How can proposed projects and legislation be accountably reviewed and evaluated in advance to prevent collateral environmental damage and reduced quality of life?
- What kinds of information should be gathered and reported to the public for accurately determining whether policy goals are being achieved?

Based on rapidly accumulating evidence documenting the costly harms attributed to the state's ill-conceived energy and development policies, it is time for Georgians to be granted the benefit of thoroughly examined policy measures that will help reduce environmental threats.

To ensure the effectiveness of these measures, throughout policymaking decisions the public must be kept well-informed and actively engaged.

David Kyler is the co-founder and director of the [Center for a Sustainable Coast](#), a donor-supported nonprofit organization established in 1997 to protect, restore and conserve coastal Georgia's environment.