

Energy efficiencies could help six states save \$20 billion

Solar, wind energy systems could be used to fill in for closed coal-burning plants

Posted: 10/09/2012 12:01:00 AM MDT

Updated: 10/09/2012 12:27:34 PM MDT

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The Denver Post

A new study finds that Colorado and five other western and southwestern states could save \$20 billion by 2030 if utilities and residents accelerated the shift toward using energy more efficiently.

In homes, this would require more overhauls to improve insulation, seal cracks, replace heaters and coolers, switch lights and swap out water-guzzling toilets and washers.

For utilities, it would require scuttling more coal-fired power plants — Colorado leaders have committed to close or convert three by 2017 — and providing subsidized audits and technology for ratepayers.

The study being released Tuesday by the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project — a Boulder-based advocacy group funded by foundations and the government — models energy scenarios for an expanding population across Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico and Nevada.

A high-efficiency "best practice" scenario would cost \$17 billion for implementing changes, the study found. The region by 2030 would gain \$37 billion — roughly \$2,650 per household. These gains, offsetting the \$17 billion investment, would give \$20 billion in net benefits.

"We've come a long way in the last 10 years. We're urging utilities and policymakers to go to the next level, (to) scale up programs," said Howard Geller, director of the project. "If we did, there would be huge benefits."

Key players, to realize gains, are utilities. The 239-page study makes the case that electric utilities in the six states will find investing in energy efficiency to be the lowest-cost, cleanest and least risky course.

The study also finds that boosting energy-efficiency programs between now and 2020 would cut electricity use by 21 percent, avoid construction of 32 large power plants, save 50 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity per year, support 28,000 new jobs and reduce air pollution by nearly 32 million metric tons of carbon dioxide. That's equivalent to taking 6.2 million passenger

vehicles off the road. Water consumption, too, would be reduced by 18.5 billion gallons a year, the study found, because power plants use large amounts of water.

Rather than replace coal-fired plants with natural-gas plants, project analysts favored solar- and wind-energy systems to fill in for closed coal plants.

In the Southwest, large urban utilities generally have done more than rural utilities in exploring efficiency. For example, Xcel offers homeowner rebates of up to \$200 for energy audits. Arizona utilities lead the action, Geller said.

But the efforts vary. In southwest Denver, for example, one utility serving 140,000 ratepayers does not offer any energy-efficiency program, he said.

Copies of the study have been sent to lawmakers in six states and to utilities. U.S. Department of Energy experts reviewed it, Geller said, and did not dispute the projected savings.

Xcel officials were reviewing it. Xcel finds that wind and solar do not provide continuous power, utility spokesman Mark Stutz said.

Southwest energy-project leaders "have been very good in advancing energy efficiency," Stutz said.

"But Xcel needs to continue to ensure that all efforts moving forward are cost-effective," he said.

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