



## Local Self-reliance

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*By the Mother Earth News editors*

*The Institute for Local Self-Reliance works to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. Because we believe that city dwellers and country folks alike can profit from the institute's admirable efforts, we've made this "what's happening where" report by the ILSR staffers one of MOTHER's regular features. If you would like to know more, you can have a free catalog of ILSR's selection of books and pamphlets by sending the institute a self-addressed, stamped envelope ... or become an associate member for a tax-deductible \$35 per year (\$50 for institutions) and receive both a periodic report on the institute's work and a 20% discount on all the group's publications. Write to ILSR, Dept. TMEN, 1717 18th Street N. W., Washington, D. C 20009.*

November 1982, when the Northwest Conservation Act Coalition made public its Model Electric Power and Conservation Plan for the Pacific Northwest, marked the first time in American history that citizens have developed their own detailed regional energy proposal (referred to in this column as the "model plan").

Ten years ago, utility planners (who routinely did their work in secret) predicted a quadrupling of the Northwest's demand for electricity by 1990. To meet that need, it was decided that the region—having exhausted its major hydroelectric capacity—should build up to 50 coal and nuclear power plants, and the area utilities wanted the Bonneville Power Administration to finance this construction. However, the BPA was established in 1937 to distribute—not produce electricity ... and in order for the agency to finance such plants, new federal legislation was necessary.

Many area residents have opposed this expansion of BPA's authority, which, in effect, centralizes planning in a federal agency originally set up to promote the widest possible consumption of electricity. Despite this opposition, the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act became law in December 1980. But because of the efforts of people interested in an energy—efficient future, the law—as finally enacted—requires *citizen participation*. In fact, for the first time, the basic data necessary for decisionmaking are open to public scrutiny. And an independent body, the Northwest Power Planning Council, was created and given a central role in developing a long-range plan for the region.

The most dramatic provision of the legislation is its use of broadly defined "cost-effectiveness" as the key criterion for acquiring new energy sources. And this will be determined not only by first construction costs,

but also by "all direct costs of a measure or resource over its effective life, including, if applicable, the cost of distribution and transmission to the consumer, and, among other factors, waste disposal costs, end-of-the-line costs, and fuel costs (including projected increases), and such quantifiable environmental costs as ... are directly attributable to such measure and resource". Therefore, before investing in *any* new coal or nuclear generation facility, the Northwest must exhaust all less-expensive conservation and renewable energy options.

The planning council will submit its final proposal by the end of April, and—to make certain that the proposal reflects Congressional emphasis on conservation—40 organizations got together to create the Northwest Conservation Act Coalition. Relying heavily on the technical expertise of the Natural Resources Defense Council, the coalition came up with a comprehensive model plan, which develops its own load forecasts, cost-estimating methodology, and recommendations ... *and* contends that cost-effective conservation would preclude the need for almost *all* new power plants.

While the model plan outlines a seemingly organized long-term energy future, the *short-term* electric power situation in the Northwest is bizarre! In the mid-1970's, more than 100 utilities (most of which are publicly owned and based in Washington) established the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS) ... which has since gone broke trying to build five nuclear reactors (two of them now mothballed). Its members owe more than \$7 billion, and the organization will soon go into technical default on its bonds. (Some say the default of WPPSS is a significant but temporary affair, while others see it as the beginning of a chain reaction that could lead to the bankruptcy of Washington state!)

Furthermore, the region appears to have gone from an envisioned energy shortage to a forecast of between eight and ten years of surplus power. And the coalition argues persuasively that a short-term energy surplus does not undermine the cost-effectiveness of aggressive conservation.

For example, one model plan recommendation provides generous financial incentives, through BPA, for cost-effective conservation. Another mandates the stiffening of energy-related building codes. (The regulations proposed by the planning council would be nearly as rigorous as Sweden's and more energy-conserving than any other code in this country.)

After the planning council approves a final plan, the question remains, will BPA listen? BPA Director Peter Johnson has already said he sees the council as an advisory group without management authority. If he ignores its recommendations, the next step would be to enact Congressional legislation changing the management structure of BPA, making it more responsive to the will of the citizenry. A key figure in this process will be Don Hodel, who was *head* of BPA when it erroneously forecast huge demand increases and vigorously persuaded WPPSS to build five nuclear reactors ... he's now U.S. Secretary of Energy!

Meanwhile, the power act has had an unintended (and positive) consequence. A generation of citizens is now learning the true cost of energy ... and the expertise gained in the Northwest will certainly spill over into other regions. The citizen-planner may well have come of age!