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Now is the time to develop renewable energy sources

By Edward M. Augustus Jr. and Timothy P. Murray

As gas prices continue to soar to record highs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, residents of the Northeast prepare for the prospect of dramatic increases in the cost of home-heating oil and natural gas. As a result, many, including the elderly, working families and those struggling to survive on fixed-incomes, will experience considerable suffering during the cold months ahead. Now is the time for each of us, consumers and policy-makers alike, to consider carefully the many benefits of renewable energy. Our continued reliance on fossil fuels and its far-reaching consequences make a compelling case to take action. At stake is the future of our economy, the future of our national security, and the future of our children. We cannot afford not to act.

The many health-related problems inherent in our reliance on fossil fuels are undeniable. Pollution from dirty sources of electricity, such as coal and oil, contribute to asthma attacks, respiratory illness, and heart disease. And according to a recent report by Abt Associates, pollution from the use of fossil fuels contributes to over 300 premature deaths annually in Massachusetts. Similarly, nuclear power and exposure to radiation are responsible for tragic and preventable cases of cancer, leukemia and genetic mutations. Furthermore, the majority of power plants in the United States are located in low-income and minority communities, which means that our use of electricity burdens those who are most in need of help.

In addition to these health-related problems, our national dependence on foreign oil imposes substantial costs on the United States economy, contributes to our trade deficit, adds to our already staggering military expenditures and makes us more vulnerable to uncertain trends and sudden spikes in oil prices. It has become painfully clear today that a substantial portion of America's military budget is spent in the Middle East in defense of oil. As a result, nations in the region understand that our dependence on fossil fuels gives them considerable influence over foreign and defense policy. If we were to shift our reliance away from foreign energy sources and toward renewable energy, we would enhance our national security at home and abroad.

So what is renewable or "clean" energy? Unlike conventional forms of energy produced by burning coal, oil and natural gas, which depend on a limited source, clean energy is supported by a limitless, constantly replenishing supply. Clean energy is powered by the sun, wind, water, fuel cells, the heat in the ground, and crop and wood waste. An international coalition that includes the United States has even proposed the development of an experimental fusion reactor called ITER. The good news is that clean energy can be produced entirely within the U.S. and that Massachusetts has already begun to make renewable energy available to consumers.

In 1997, Massachusetts created the outlines for a "renewable portfolio standard," which would allow electricity providers in the state to provide renewable energy sources in increasing amounts each year. This means that consumers have the option to purchase clean, renewable energy for an addition cost of \$4 to \$12 per month which, in many cases, would amount to less than the cost of a movie ticket. What's more, there is an added incentive for consumers to purchase clean energy through matching dollar grants from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. For every \$1 a consumer pays for clean energy, up to \$1 will be given to the consumer's town or city and up to \$1 will be given to low-income communities in Massachusetts.

A coalition of organizations that includes the Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light, the Regional Environmental Council and Clean Water Action has worked tirelessly to encourage residents in the city of Worcester to purchase clean energy. We strongly support their efforts. Now is the time for residents who have not chosen to purchase clean energy to consider making this important decision. The additional cost is small but the benefits are many. In addition, if 3 percent of Worcester's households, approximately 2,000 households, purchase Clean Energy by the end of September, Worcester will receive a bonus grant of \$50 per house. This means that at least \$100,000 will go toward clean energy projects in the city.

For more information about purchasing clean energy, call Massachusetts Interfaith Power & Light in Worcester at 508-795-1400 or visit www.MIPandL.org. You may also contact the Regional Environmental Council at 508-799-9193 or visit www.recworchester.org.

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