Weathering the "Perfect Storm"

Our nation's electric utility industry is heading into a "perfect storm." While the amount of electricity we use everyday steadily increases, the capacity to generate and transmit that power is running short. In the past fossil fuel-fired power plants were the go-to option to meet growing new demand with proven technology, but looming federal regulations on carbon dioxide emissions is changing that. The cost of complying with new regulations could make electricity less affordable for everyone.

In December, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a part of the executive branch, declared that six key greenhouse gases from auto emissions, including carbon dioxide, are "endangering public health and welfare" of current and future generations. Emissions from motor vehicles of four of those greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, were also said to contribute to dangerous air pollution.

The endangerment finding puts a foot in the door for EPA to issue sweeping new rules that could impose strict limits on carbon emissions, including those from power plants. The cost of generating electricity would go up, and in the end those costs would hit consumer pocketbooks.

Congress is mulling over its own set of carbon dioxide regulations, and we must continue to ask that any resulting legislation be fair, affordable, and technologically achievable. If passed, Congressional legislation should also preempt use of any other existing laws, fixing a regulatory disaster that would only add to costs for consumers with a mess of overlapping red tape.

Whatever the political outcome, the honest truth is the change will not come overnight. Fossil fuels currently account for more than 70 percent of all electricity generated in the United States. New technology will be key to both keeping these traditional options up-to-date and refining new ways to affordably keep the lights on. Cleaner use of fossil fuels, an increased use of renewable energy, and a big commitment to energy efficiency will all be necessary.

Electric co-ops have a long history of providing safe, reliable, and affordable electricity to their members, and no "perfect storm" is going to keep us from continuing to do our job. Co-op research projects are already underway to expand the current limits of renewable energy, make coal- and natural gas-fired power plants cleaner and more efficient, and possibly even capture carbon dioxide from plant emissions before they go up a smokestack and store them deep underground to keep them out of the atmosphere.

The Arlington, Va.-based Cooperative Research Network, of which Cherryland Electric Cooperative is a member, was recently awarded a $33.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy, which will support a wide-ranging "smart grid" research project. The effort brings together 27 electric co-ops in 10 states, which will match the grant money awarded to create a pool of nearly $68 million for ground-breaking technology development. With a smarter electric grid, we'll be able to deliver electricity to our consumers more efficiently—cutting the amount of emissions we will need to generate as a result.

Co-ops have stepped up to challenges in the past, and I have no doubt our response to this challenge will be any different in the end. But we need your help in relaying to Congress just how important it is to keep climate legislation fair, affordable, and technologically achievable. To make your voice heard, join the Our Energy, Our Future grassroots awareness campaign at www.ourenergy.coop.