

# Clean Power Coalition and Climate Change

By Tom Rutkowski, Founding Member of the  
Clean Power Coalition of South Wisconsin

Just a few weeks ago 900 fires were consuming vast areas of the western United States. At the same time hurricanes lined up in the Atlantic like flights waiting their turn to land, so many, in fact, that all the letters in our alphabet had been used to name this season's hurricanes.

Just last week, as if in response to those catastrophes, Walmart announced their target of zero emissions by 2040, following a target set by Google of becoming carbon free by 2030. In that same week, General Electric announced that they would no longer be in the business of building coal-fired power plants. On Tuesday of that week, Tesla announced plans for a million mile battery as well as plans to hit the \$100 per kilowatt-hour for batteries, a goal that will make electric cars competitive in price with combustion engine vehicles. To complement that announcement Gavin Newsom, the Governor of California, announced that only electric vehicles will be sold in the state in 15 years.

Walmart and Google and Tesla aren't exactly models of "bottom up" change, but they do represent a powerful response to climate change when leadership and action are lacking from the top down. They also represent a response to the will of the American people, the customers, and employees and majority of citizens who believe in science and are pushing for change from the grassroots level. Clearly these companies and this state are ready to address the crisis of climate change and to take significant action. These actions would be even more powerful with national policies and actions based on scientific understanding of climate change, but they represent a building consensus that action must be taken now.

Even before the skies above San Francisco turned Martian orange and the "extremely active" hurricane season of 2020 began, people concerned about climate change was reaching record levels. For the first time, climate action is receiving the attention it deserves during the presidential election. That concern and call for action, the voices from the bottom up, have only grown stronger since this month of catastrophe.

In an effort that would enable people in my own community to take action on climate change and generate their own electricity, I organized a group buy for solar panel installations that eventually expanded to our own county and two neighboring counties. Making renewable energy more accessible and educating the local community on the benefits and affordability of solar energy, the group buy was a success that kept growing over the five years it has operated. A relatively rare sight, now solar installations have popped up on houses around town and word of mouth spreads that message that much or all of your electrical needs can be generated from your own rooftop. I am no longer involved in the group buy, but I continue to advocate for favorable policies in Wisconsin that will make this resource more equitably distributed. In the future I feel that community-owned solar projects will make this possible.

Three years ago I was part of a group that formed that Clean Power Coalition of Southeast Wisconsin, a coalition of twenty-five religious, environmental and social justice groups focused

on the retirement of the nearby coal plants in our area. We Energies, the utility serving our part of Wisconsin, built one of the plants around 2011; the other has been operating since the late 1950's. Together they are the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the state, and the third largest source of toxic metals such as mercury and lead in our water.

Over the last ten years the price of renewable energy has decreased by 85%. Now renewables are cheaper to use than almost all coal plants. This is true of both of We Energies plants here, but especially true of the older of the two plants which is operating at a loss of seventy-five million dollars a year above the cost of already available renewables.

The Clean Power Coalition exists to pressure this regulated monopoly into doing what utilities all around the country are already doing. Since 2010 over three hundred and ten coal plants have been retired in the United States and in May of this year, energy generated from renewable sources surpassed energy generated from coal for the first time.

The members of the coalition have testified at hearings, attended shareholder meetings, organized petitions and rallies, offered educational programs and written dozens of LTE's and op-ed pieces. We know that the both of these coal plants will be retired; we are pushing "from the bottom up" to make that retirement sooner than later. We know that the stakes couldn't be higher. The rewards of cleaner air and water, lower electrical prices, and a stable climate are well worth whatever effort it will take.