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## Every electron is not neutral

ISO-New England's policies are blind and shortsighted



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**WE NEW ENGLANDERS** have a spectacular opportunity to move rapidly from polluting fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy. This transition will benefit us all: It will slow climate change, reduce pollution, save lives, and preserve New England's beautiful environment for our children and their children.

A wholesale transition to renewable energy will also save us money. The cost of producing electricity from solar power has fallen by 90 percent in the past decade; wind power's cost has fallen by 50 percent. In many parts of New England, it's now cheaper to produce electricity from renewables than from any fossil fuel.

But if we are to seize this moment, keep our skies blue, and prevent our planet from overheating, we need to educate ourselves about an obscure but very powerful organization: ISO-New England, the group that manages our region's electric power grid.

ISO-New England decides where to source our electricity, how to price it, and how to keep it flowing throughout the year.

One of ISO's key responsibilities is to divide the subsidies we all provide each year when we pay our electric bills. Approximately 10 to 20 percent of our electric payments – \$45-90 million annually from Massachusetts residents alone —goes into these subsidies, called [forward capacity payments](#). ISO-New England divides this money among the region's power plants. The problem is that ISO-New England divides the money unfairly.

ISO operates under a policy that “every electron is neutral,” which means that coal, gas, and oil-fired power plants are given the same priority as facilities that produce electricity from wind and solar power. All that matters to ISO-New England is “reliability and cost.”

This approach is blind and short sighted. It is dangerous for our health and highly damaging to our environment.

Fossil fuel combustion is the major source of the greenhouse gases that drive climate change. It is also a major source of air pollution that increases risk for heart disease, stroke, lung disease, and premature birth and drives up our health care costs. These risks are greatest in our most vulnerable communities. They disproportionately harm our children.

In an age when climate-driven forest fires and hurricanes are devastating our country, and when air pollution from fossil fuels has hastened the death of millions suffering from COVID-19, the notion that “every electron is neutral” is absurd.

As physicians and members of Climate Code Blue, a group of New England doctors advocating for a healthier climate, we have a responsibility to speak up.

ISO-New England has called for assessing a price on the carbon contained in fuels used to generate electricity, which would make electricity generated using fossil fuels more expensive. But we believe that ISO-New England must go further, using the power at its disposal in running the forward capacity market to protect our health and our environment.

The grid operator must immediately prioritize wind and solar power over coal, gas, and oil, and reject the false notion that gas is a safe “bridge fuel.” It must end the subsidies to the fossil fuel industry that are embedded in the policy that “every electron is neutral.” It must incentivize the adoption of renewables and upgrade the power grid to make the transmission of renewable electricity reliable and economically feasible.

We call on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and for regulators in the six New England states to require that ISO-New England prioritize renewable electricity over fossil fuel electricity, and to reform their pricing structure and subsidy allocations. We call on the Committee on Energy and Commerce of the US House of Representatives and the legislatures in the New England states to support these changes.

We all have opportunities to voice support for reshaping ISO-New England's policies. Anyone can [submit a public comment](#) to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Anyone can attend a [Consumer Liaison Group Meeting](#) for ISO-New England. Finally, we can all contact our Massachusetts state senators and representatives to express our concern.

ISO-New England's website states that they are responsible for ensuring that New England has reliable electricity "today and into the future." But for our region to have a future, ISO-New England must act responsibly now and update their policies. Even if a transition to renewable energy is slightly more expensive in the short term, it will save billions over the next decade and it will make us all healthier.

None of us can afford any longer to pretend that "all electrons are neutral."

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