

Utilities can kick coal – together we're showing them how

By Ken Miller, Clean Energy Program Director

The Snake River Alliance never said it would be easy for Idaho's Big 3 electric utilities to move from coal to clean alternatives – a move that is required for Idaho to reduce its climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions from the distant coal plants that provide half of our electricity. But thanks to our supporters and the hard work and engagement of our members, we saw more progress than ever in 2014 and we expect bigger things in 2015 as we pursue perhaps the most transformative change to Idaho's electric utility sector: eliminating the use of coal-fired power generation to produce significant amounts of our electricity.

As the first clean energy advocate in Idaho to call on our utilities to replace coal generation with expanded energy efficiency and renewable energy resources, the Alliance analyzed [in multiple reports](#) the breadth of such an overhaul of our electricity sector and how this change will bring energy dollars back home while creating new energy jobs and bolstering our state and local economies. The close of 2014 is a good time to review how these utilities are preparing (or not) for both the inevitable retirement of these heavily polluting, climate-changing coal plants and for the clean energy revolution that will be required to replace all that coal:

▶ **Idaho Power:** The state's largest electric utility remains committed to its Nevada and Wyoming coal plants for about 40 percent of its generation, and it plans to continue investing massive amounts of customer dollars into its coal fleet to try to keep those plants legally operating. However, we are beginning to see a softening in Idaho Power's historic resistance to adding renewable energy to its system, a realization that coal's days are numbered, and a recognition by the company that it must build a robust system of energy efficiency and conservation measures rather than new power plants. It's too early to congratulate Idaho Power for turning its back on dirty energy, but it's

clear the company sees coal has no future. The Alliance sits on Idaho Power's resource planning group and is among those pushing Idaho Power's planners to plan for life without coal – something that to Idaho Power's credit is now happening. Slowly, but surely.

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▶ **PacifiCorp:** Known in Idaho as Rocky Mountain Power, PacifiCorp is up to its eyeballs in coal plants, which are spread across the West and which account for more than three-fourths of its total generation. So shaking the coal habit will be a higher lift for this multi-state utility, although PacifiCorp, which is owned by a company owned mostly by billionaire Warren Buffett, continues to add significant amounts of new renewable energy, primarily wind. Meanwhile, PacifiCorp, which like Idaho Power is under growing scrutiny by Idaho and Oregon utility regulators over its coal operations, is planning to retire or convert some of its coal plants to natural gas. We believe PacifiCorp is starting to realize that in order to remain viable, it must begin the long process of coal plant retirements. The utility also deserves high marks for its approach to adding more energy efficiency and conservation, which is vital to a coal-free future.

▶ **Avista:** Serving portions of north Idaho, Spokane-based Avista is not flinching from its 15 percent ownership of the huge, dirty Colstrip coal plant in eastern Montana. Still, we give Avista

passing grades for having the least amount of coal in its portfolio of the three utilities. And because Avista is showing encouraging signs of embracing solar power and in some cases expanded energy efficiency, Avista is best suited to be the first Idaho utility to go coal-free.

At the Alliance, we're all about energy efficiency as a primary tool in getting us off coal. Here, the picture is mixed, and the reasons have as much to do with utilities lacking motivation to sell less of their product (electricity) as uneven state policies that don't prioritize efficiency. In its annual State Energy Efficiency Scorecard, the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy (ACEEE) ranked Idaho 30th in the nation in promoting energy-saving measures, up just one spot from 2013. Idaho scored better than average for its energy-saving building codes, but was below average for utility programs and efficient appliance standards. Being among the lower half of states is unacceptable: Idaho can and must do better to save energy, and by extension, reduce the need for coal power.