

Kosovo is counting on the U.S. for leadership

By Daniel M. Kammen

Over the past decade, plans for 160 new coal-fired power plants in the United States have been scrapped, largely due to rising costs and an inability to compete in today's energy markets. While the United States is still dependent on coal for about half of our electricity, today growth is in low-carbon sources, renewable energy and efficiency.

This is because once "expensive" clean energy costs have fallen dramatically while "cheap" fossil fuels are increasingly expensive in economic, health and environmental terms. As a result, in many parts of the world, wind is the least-cost source of electricity. In addition, in the sunniest parts of the United States long-term forecasts are for growth in solar energy and natural gas, but not for coal.

The clean-versus-dirty debate is also playing out in Europe's poorest nation, Kosovo, which suffers hours of power outages each day, and which is well endowed with a particularly dirty form of brown coal, lignite. To some, this seems to mean that Kosovars are wedded to coal for decades to come. This is where the experience in California, and in the United States more broadly, is so important.

The U.S. government and the World Bank can aid Kosovo with funding and technical support that will permit them to develop a holistic approach to energy diversity and security. By contrast, investing in coal forces Kosovo (which aspires to join the European Union) to live with less job creation than a clean energy path would bring. Further President Obama has nominated Dartmouth College President Jim Yong Kim to be the next head of the World Bank. It would be ironic and sad to saddle Kosovo's citizens and this public health innovator with a polluting coal-fired project.

Kosovo's energy shortages occur at times of peak demand. A coal plant cannot respond to rapidly changing peak demands, so on simple

engineering grounds, a new coal plant is not the right solution. A decade ago, California faced blackouts during times of peak demand, too, and found that energy diversity — gas-fired “peaker plants,” not adding dirty baseload plants, to be the right solution. Strong grids make good neighbors — and Kosovo and Albania in particular are on excellent terms and would both benefit economically by building strong, linked, clean energy markets. There are increasingly strident calls from civil society to found the young country’s future on clean alternatives that will provide far more jobs and ensure energy access for all Kosovars. The world has changed, now Kosovo needs the World Bank and the U.S. government to champion sustainable development and help Kosovo lead a new clean energy path.

Daniel M. Kammen is a professor of energy at the UC Berkeley in the Energy and Resources Group and the Goldman School of Public Policy. He serves the U. S. State Department as a Clean Energy Fellow to the Americas.