

GUEST COLUMN:

Forward-looking policies will unleash abundant renewable energy resources

By Curt Ledford

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I'm a business lawyer at one of the largest and oldest law firms in Nevada. Each morning on my drive to work, I pass the Las Vegas Strip, which is blossoming with new construction. Sometimes I think about the energy powering the Strip's light displays, entertainment venues and observation wheel — how much juice is needed, where it comes from and what it costs. These aren't idle thoughts to pass time in traffic. I'm an energy attorney. Energy in Nevada is literally my day job.

After more than a decade of working in Nevada's energy industry, here's one thing I've learned: Policy matters. When Nevada's elected officials enact smart, business-friendly, clean energy policies, the state's economy grows. When we prioritize renewable energy and energy efficiency, we create good jobs in industries like solar, storage, geothermal and construction.

But when we put short-sighted policies in place, the clean energy industry contracts. Businesses leave. Jobs slip away.

Consider net metering. In late 2015, following a new law that forced the state to reconsider its net-metering policies, state utility regulators dramatically undercut the economics of residential solar installations in Nevada.

Result? Major solar companies fled the state and hundreds of workers lost their jobs. However, about 18 months later, the Legislature passed a bill essentially reinstating the rates at which homeowners with rooftop solar panels could sell excess electricity to the local utility. And just like that, the solar industry in Nevada — worth \$5.7 billion — was back on track. Jobs returned. Now, Nevada is again one of the five fastest-growing states in the country in terms of solar power generation.

To understand clean energy's impact on Nevada's economy and labor market, consider that our state saw the biggest growth in clean energy jobs in 2018, according to the just-released Clean Jobs Nevada report from the national nonpartisan business group E2 (Environmental Entrepreneurs), increasing 32 percent to 32,000 jobs. Solar, energy efficiency, battery storage and other clean energy businesses now employ Nevadans in all 17 counties, including more than 14,000 jobs in Clark County alone.

Nine out of 10 clean energy jobs in Nevada are concentrated in three cutting-edge industries — energy efficiency (11,000 jobs), solar (9,700) and energy storage (8,300).

So how can we create more of these jobs and keep our state competitive in one of the most crucial international industries of the 21st century?

First, lawmakers in Carson City should pass Senate Bill 358. The legislation is a logical next step following overwhelming public approval of Question 6 in November, the ballot initiative to increase our state's renewable portfolio standard. The legislation would implement the goals of Question 6 for our state to get at least 50 percent of our energy from clean, renewable sources — including solar, wind and geothermal — by 2030. The bill also sets a goal of producing electricity from zero-carbon emission resources equal to 100 percent of the state utilities' sales by 2050.

Second, policymakers should scale up deployment of electric vehicles and EV infrastructure. This will help realize the state's goal of an "Electric Highway" linking our highways and interstates with a string of charging stations, something I would support even if I didn't drive an EV.

Another approach involves Nevada's share of the \$3 billion Volkswagen Environmental Mitigation Trust. By prioritizing zero-emission vehicles when investing those funds, and stretching them further by securing matching investments from the electric industry, we can further encourage EV development and help our environment.

Further, we can provide customers point-of-sale rebates or tax incentives to purchase zero-emission vehicles. According to the Clean Jobs Nevada report, about 1,500 Nevadans now work in clean transportation and fuels. Steps like these can keep those clean transportation jobs growing.

Finally, the state should improve access to clean energy for all Nevadans, regardless of what type of home they live in. Assembly Bill 205, an example of good energy policy from 2017, affords all Nevadans the right and ability to enjoy the benefit of renewable energy, not just residents of single-family homes.

To take the next step, lawmakers should approve SB167, which enables owners of apartments to add rooftop solar to their buildings and offer that clean energy to their tenants. Legislators can also advance a community solar bill which would set aside investments benefiting low-income clean energy consumers.

As I drive down Interstate 15 daily in my Chevrolet Volt during my daily commute, I know we're blessed with amazing renewable energy resources here in Nevada. And we have tens of thousands of clean-energy workers across the state who understand how energy efficiency and clean renewables improve our quality of life and boost the bottom lines of local businesses. But to truly keep our economy competitive in a fast-changing industry, we must continue to strengthen our clean energy policies today, and in the years to come.

Curt Ledford is a partner at McDonald Carano, a Nevada business law firm. Previously, he was general counsel at Valley Electric Association. He is a member of E2 and was recently chairman of the board of the Clean Energy Project.