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Natural gas must be stored here

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By *Harold McLean*

Lots of things in modern life are so complex. Sometimes, it's hard to see the big picture. Natural gas storage in Florida is a lot like that.

I just retired as the state's utility consumer advocate and I learned something while I served that we should all consider: electrical energy is the lifeblood of our culture. Simply put, when it stops flowing, we stop going. Whether it's your morning coffee, the traffic light down the street from your home, the place where you work, your kids' schools, the hospital where you may need care, or the big department store where you like to shop — when they lose electricity things stop. And stop in their tracks. We need look no further than the 2005 hurricane season for proof.

So if electrical energy is that important, why don't we just store it up for a rainy day just like we do water, flashlight batteries, a few days worth of food, etc.? Well, we don't store it because it can't be stored. When utilities generate power, it is immediately used. No one has figured out how to store significant quantities of electrical energy.

So, what can we do? We can do the next best thing. We can store the fuel from which the utilities make electricity. Fortunately, lots of it can be stored cheaply and easily. Indeed, the next time you drive by a power plant — I confess, I kind of like to drive by 'em — take a look. What do you see: maybe big oil tanks and several of them. A huge coal stack; maybe thirty days worth. And when you see a nuclear plant — well you can't see much because they don't want anyone snooping around — but, trust me on this, they can run for a very long time on the fuel they have on-hand.

But guess what: Florida utilities rely heavily on clean-burning natural gas. To what extent? Well, about 65 percent of the electrical energy available in peninsular Florida comes from natural gas. Well over half. There are good reasons for this degree of reliance: natural gas is among the cleanest fuels, it's relatively plentiful and it's usually cheap.

However, there is a downside to the reliance on natural gas. Florida doesn't have any. We have to get it from somewhere else.

Most of the natural gas we use comes to us through two pipelines, one crosses the Gulf of Mexico and one crosses Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, the Florida panhandle, and finally arrives in central and south Florida. Lots of miles; lots of chances for interruption from storms, and in today's world, who knows what else.

But there's good news: Florida utilities have wisely contracted to store relatively large quantities of natural gas. That's a good thing because they can buy gas when it's cheap and store it; they can draw from their storage when gas is expensive. Maybe when supplies are interrupted for whatever reason, they can draw from storage for immediate use. Well, not quite immediate. And that's the bad news: all the gas stored by Florida utilities is stored in some other state. They don't store any here.

That's a little bit like storing your spare flashlight batteries over at your neighbor's house. Works well if you can get to your neighbor's house in your time of need — ahhh, unless your neighbor wants them more than you do

And all that gas we have stored over in Mississippi and Alabama, guess how we get it, if we can get it: by those same pipelines. If they're still capable of delivering. And they probably will be, maybe even at full capacity. But what if they're not? Maybe you don't need spare batteries. But what if you do?

Just like we store our spare flashlight batteries in our homes, we need to ensure that our big utilities, and maybe the small ones too, store gas here near our homes in Florida. Remember: we don't store any natural gas here. None. If our pipeline supply is interrupted partly or completely, there is a good chance we will suffer brown-outs and other extreme disruption of our economy and our lives. That has a big price — in the billions.

Fortunately, there is hope and opportunity. There are reputable firms gearing up to build safe and efficient storage facilities in Florida. Our big utilities and the various regulatory authorities under which they operate need to thoroughly investigate storing gas with them in Florida.

Here's the big picture I mentioned at the start: Natural gas storage in other states is good but we need more. We need natural gas storage in Florida. Storing natural gas here in Florida to have when and where we need it has a modest price to be sure.

But being able to count on electrical energy produced from natural gas stored right here at home in Florida?

That's priceless!

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