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Renewable energy should be part of the mix

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In this time of uncertainty concerning our sources of energy, one thing is certain — renewable resources are destined to be a part of the mix. Wind, water, solar and thermal will likely not overtake coal or natural gas, but they bring a lot to the table. They will not compete, necessarily, but they do have the potential to complement the use of coal and gas.

In Staff Writer Brittany Murray's Sunday story, it is evident that West Virginia is already dipping its toe into renewable energy. The Public Service Commission reports that more than 16 percent of the state's energy production comes from renewable resources.

The most visible of those resources are the collection of wind farms in Barbour, Grant, Randolph, Tucker and Preston counties. Operated by AES Corp., site manager Steve Abe says the wind turbines crank out enough energy every year for thousands of homes.

"We like to keep our lights on. We like to have air conditioning when it's hot. And we like to have heaters when it's cold," he said. "We're very accustomed to having that electricity come on when we flip that switch."

In the past three years, there have been 14 solar co-ops formed around the state. Organized through West Virginia Solar United Neighborhoods, homeowners have utilized a cheap source of energy.

"Our co-ops are essentially groups of neighbors and homeowners in a specific area or town who go solar together," said co-op coordinator Autumn Long. "They can save money, and they have the support of West Virginia SUN," she said.

With the cost of installing solar panels falling, the future for solar in West Virginia could be a boon for business and for the consumer.

"The solar industry is growing at a rate that is several times the rate of the overall economy

Long said. "We're seeing like 20 percent growth rates year after year in the industry as a whole."

Water is another renewable resource that holds great promise in West Virginia. American Municipal Power has been adding hydroelectric energy at existing dams along the Ohio River. Two of those operations provide power in Wood County and in St. Marys.

"The projects, they're environmentally and regulatory neutral," she said. "They don't have a fuel procurements, and they help meet rating agency metrics, and they have no waste stream," said Krista Barber, director of media relations and communications.

Another potential source of renewable energy in West Virginia lies below the surface. Southern Methodist University released a study showing hot patches three miles under the state at temperatures of almost 400 degrees Fahrenheit.

New oil and gas drilling techniques could make it much easier to extract this power source, which may, perhaps, one day help burn coal more cleanly.

The hot fluid could be used to dry coal, making it burn more efficiently.

While coal and natural gas are the main sources of fuel in today's energy market, renewables are showing that they can play a part in generating power for our nation. In the next decade or so, we could see wind, solar, hydro and geothermal energies becoming a bigger part of the mix.

And renewables could be a solid, stable source of jobs for those workers displaced by mechanization in the coal industry.

Although renewable energy is only a fraction of the energy production in the state, it appears to be growing, and for that reason, we should embrace it and help it succeed.