Creating a Clean Energy Future by 2030

A Blueprint for Public Power in Nebraska

For years, you have read in the Nebraska Report about the dangers of climate change, and the broad consensus among climate scientists that global warming is real and caused by human activities. You have also read about the detrimental health and other impacts of burning coal to produce our electricity, and the need to move quickly towards clean, renewable energy.

The window, however, for making this move is closing rapidly.

The best climate science currently says we only have until 2030 to get off carbon fuels if we are to avoid catastrophic climate change.

Is such a transformation even possible in 18 years?

For Nebraska and other states, it will require a complete overhaul of the way we produce and use energy. Nebraska’s system of public power, which is 100 percent-owned by the citizens of our state, should be ideally positioned to make that transition.

Unfortunately, our system of public ownership has fallen well short of its potential.

For example, while public support for wind energy in Nebraska is overwhelming and our wind energy potential is the fourth-best in the entire country, our state ranks far behind every surrounding state in installed wind farms. About 20 percent of Iowa’s electricity now comes from wind, as does 23 percent of South Dakota’s electricity. Every surrounding state (even Wyoming, home of the Power River Basin and its monumental coal supply) has more wind energy in place than Nebraska. Wyoming now gets 10 percent of its electricity from wind.

In 2010, Nebraska got just 1 percent of our electricity from wind and solar. Sixty-four percent of our electricity came from coal, and 30 percent came from two nuclear power plants. Hydroelectric dams provided about 4 percent of our state’s electricity, and natural gas provided the remaining 1 percent.

Diversified? Hardly.

Worse, Nebraska utilities are moving in the wrong direction. The U.S. Department of Energy’s Energy Information Administration projects that electricity demand will grow by about 0.8 percent per year over the next 30 years. Nebraska utilities think Nebraska’s demand will grow about twice as fast, even though Nebraska’s population is expected to grow slower than the nation as a whole.

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Nebraska Report

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Nebraskans for Peace

NFP is a statewide grassroots advocacy organization working nonviolently for peace with justice through community-building, education and political action.

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Managing Our Demand

At that growth rate, we would need to add about four new 600 MW power plants over the next two decades to meet our needs. Based on past practice by our utilities, much of that need would be met by burning even more fossil fuels.

So what could Nebraska look like in 2030?

Public Power in Nebraska, continued

Focused investment by each of Nebraska’s electric utilities—now and in the future—could more than offset any projected growth in need. Instead of building new power-plants, we could be closing down some of the oldest, dirtiest power-plants in our state.

That would require an annual investment much higher than Nebraska’s electric utilities are currently making. In round numbers, achieving those gains would require an investment of roughly $100 million per year statewide. Nebraska’s three largest electric utilities combined—Nebraska Public Power District, Omaha Public Power District, and Lincoln Electric System—are investing less than one-tenth of that amount today.

Without that $100 million annual investment, Nebraska utilities are on a collision course with the growing need for energy, and the customer-owners of our electric system will ultimately pay the price. With that investment, which represents roughly 4 percent of retail electricity sales in the state, Nebraskans could make the most efficient use of the electricity they use.

Eighteen years from now, Nebraskans could be enjoying the same benefits that electricity now provides and meeting growth in population and energy demand, but be using 20 percent less electricity and producing far fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

Clean, Renewable Energy

Energy efficiency can substantially reduce the amount of electricity we use,
Public Power in Nebraska, conclusion

but cannot completely eliminate it.
Fortunately, the cost of wind energy has been falling, and the cost of solar energy has been falling even faster. New wind farms can generate electricity for 4 cents per kilowatt hour or less—less than the per-kilowatt cost from a new coal-fired power-plant.

Solar energy too is becoming more affordable by the day. When large California utilities asked for bids for solar energy last year, they were surprised to get bids that came in at 8.9 cents/kWh or less. While more expensive than wind, solar energy is actually more valuable because it peaks during the summer and during the day—times when electricity usage peaks for Nebraska utilities. As technology improves, solar costs are expected to continue to drop.

And unlike wind generation, solar is also suitable for urban residential use. Already we’re seeing Nebraska homeowners investing in rooftop solar systems that generate the bulk of their residential energy.

As utilities turn more and more to renewable energy, however, they will need to develop energy storage techniques. The technology is already available to pump water up the hill when winds are strong and electricity demand is low, running it back down through turbines to generate electricity when needed. Utilities are already working to shift loads away from late afternoon when electric demand peaks. They must now get creative about shifting loads towards times when wind and solar is most available.

With the investments in energy efficiency noted above, 2,600 MW of wind generation capacity (about 33 wind farms) would be able to generate close to 40 percent of Nebraska’s electrical needs in 2030. With over 300 MW already in place and 18 years to build them, that is less than two new 80 MW wind farms per year. Our neighboring states of Iowa and Minnesota already have more than 4,300 MW and 2,700 MW of wind capacity in place respectively—and Nebraska has far better wind potential than either of them.

Closing the Gap: Nuclear and Natural Gas

Nebraska has two nuclear power-plants, Cooper Nuclear Station and Fort Calhoun. Fort Calhoun is currently out of service, but if Omaha Public Power District can bring it back online safely, these two power plants could continue to generate electricity. With the energy efficiency strategy outlined above, by 2030, nuclear energy would be meeting around 40 percent of our electricity demand—about the same as wind.

Additional investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy would continue, enabling us to ultimately shut down both of these nuclear power plants as they reach the end of their design life.

Natural gas currently meets very little of Nebraska’s energy needs, but with natural gas costs now very low that is changing. Natural gas is also a fossil fuel, but generally burns much cleaner than coal. Natural gas is a much better fit with renewable energy like wind and solar, because it can ramp up and down easily to provide backup power.

Solar energy and demand management should be able to meet most of our needs for peak demand, especially in the summer. But where it cannot, natural gas can fill in. In the scenario above, natural gas and solar would need to meet just 15 percent of Nebraska’s electrical needs by 2030.

And coal? We wouldn’t need it.

Health, Jobs, and Security

The benefits of clean energy for Nebraska are clear: cleaner air, less asthma, less heart disease, less mercury in our water and air, and no greenhouse gas emissions to aggravate the conditions of climate change. But there are other benefits. The jobs clean energy would bring to rural and urban areas alike will provide a big boost to our state economy. And a clean energy strategy that utilizes our state’s native resources frees us from the risk that events outside of Nebraska—whether international oil and gas markets or coal supplies in Wyoming—would continue to drive up energy prices for Nebraskans.

For all Nebraskans, a clean energy future makes good economic sense, and good environmental sense. What is lacking is leadership. From the Governor to the Legislature to our public power districts, we hear apathy or opposition at worst and ‘go slow’ at best. Nebraskans deserve better. The state that delivered on the promise of public power three generations ago needs to show the nation how to deliver now on the urgent need to create a clean energy future.

The Future is Up to You

Nebraska’s three largest utilities, Omaha Public Power District (OPPD), Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) and the Lincoln Electric System (LES), are all looking at future options for supplying the electricity you use.

NPPD is the farthest along and plans to identify some preferred options this fall. LES is taking input on its integrated resources plan online at www.LES.com, and has scheduled a public forum on Tuesday, August 7. OPPD is starting on a similar process. Many rural public power districts and municipal utilities rely on NPPD to generate their electricity, so they are involved as well.

Your electric utility needs to hear from you! You are the owner—not just the customer—of your electric utility. Speak out now and tell your utility managers and board that you support clean energy like wind, solar and energy efficiency.

The decisions Nebraska utilities make over the next 12 months could launch us into a clean energy future (or lock us into a dirty one) for decades to come. Make your voice heard. The future is up to you.
Myths vs. Realities of Pentagon Spending

Prepared by the Center for International Policy www.ciponline.org

MYTH: The military has been cut to the bone. Any more cuts would be ‘doomsday.’

Reality: Nearly all of the purported ‘cuts’ to the Pentagon’s budget are actually reductions in the rate of growth, rather than true cuts in funding levels. In reality, even if sequestration is fully enacted as planned under the 2011 Budget Control Act, the Pentagon’s base budget would only return to 2006 levels (adjusted for inflation), which at the time was among the highest levels of spending since World War II.

The Pentagon has asked for $525 billion in funding for fiscal year 2013—a reduction of only $6 billion from the current year. The Pentagon budget would then resume its upward climb, rising to $567 billion in 2017. As former Assistant Secretary of Defense Lawrence J. Korb has noted, “even when adjusted for inflation, Panetta’s reductions halt the growth in the Pentagon’s budget, but they... do not bring the budget down much from its current level.” And while Congress has yet to enact funding for fiscal year 2013, it appears ready to increase the Pentagon’s budget, replacing the Defense Department’s extremely modest reductions with another year of growth.

Current reductions must also be measured against the unprecedented growth in Pentagon spending over the past 13 years. Since 1998, the Pentagon’s base budget has grown by 54 percent (adjusted for inflation). Moreover, with the country turning the page on a long decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the planned reductions represent a historically small drawdown when compared with those following the end of Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War.

MYTH: Defense spending is at near historic lows as a share of GDP, and is scheduled to drop even further as a share of GDP under current plans.

Reality: Spending as a percentage of GDP does not accurately reflect defense capabilities. Instead, spending should be measured against actual threats to our country and actual spending by other countries. We spend more on the Pentagon and related military activities than all of our potential adversaries combined—over four times what China spends—and roughly double what we spent in 2001.

Defense spending includes not just the Pentagon’s budget, but also intelligence, veteran’s affairs, defense-related atomic energy programs, defense-related interest on the national debt and other defense-related agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security.

Altogether, this constitutes 23 percent of the entire federal budget, more than half of discretionary spending, or $832 billion.

MYTH: Defense cuts will result in massive layoffs, leaving large numbers of unemployed veterans and encouraging outsourcing.

Reality: Pentagon spending is not a jobs program, and in fact, it is a particularly poor job creator. Virtually any other use of the same money—including a tax cut—creates more jobs. At a time of austerity, maintaining bloated Pentagon budgets will mean cuts in spending on education, infrastructure, clean energy and other needed public investments, resulting in a net loss of jobs nationwide. Cutting Pentagon spending will likely save more jobs than cutting nonmilitary funds, which produce 50 percent larger economic benefits during times of normal growth.

We have added 100,000 troops to build our force up for the Afghan and Iraq wars, but we no longer need such a high troop level. Through normal attrition, we can responsibly get back down to previous levels. Significantly, both Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James F. Amos and his predecessor, retired Gen. James T. Conway, believe the current Marine Corps is “both too large and too heavy to fulfill its traditional missions going forward.”

The largest savings can come from eliminating overpriced service contractors. Outsourcing is an even poorer job creator than Pentagon spending as a whole. Growth in contracting, driven by an army of high-priced lobbyists, has been one of the main causes of growth in the Pentagon’s budget over the past decade. And with several recent years of record profits and billions in backlogged orders, Pentagon contractors have both plenty of money and work to keep their employees busy for years to come.

MYTH: Military cuts will leave the military a ‘hollow force.’

Reality: Our conventional and nuclear forces are more capable, better equipped, and better trained than any other military force in the world. For example, as former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates explains, with 11 large, nuclear-powered carriers, the U.S. Navy can carry twice as many aircraft at sea as the rest of the world combined, and the Marine Corps is the largest force of its type, exceeding in size most nations’ armies.

Despite the scare tactics over ‘hollowing out the force,’ the reality is that sensible reductions can strengthen U.S. defense capabilities by eliminating waste of limited resources on unnecessary programs. Further, as the U.S. marginally reduces the size of our active duty forces, we will strengthen the capabilities of the Air Force, Navy and Special Forces, creating a more agile and responsive fighting force. The danger of creating a “hollow force” comes not from sensibly reshaping our defense, but from Congress protecting pet projects and contractors and lobbyists protecting corporate welfare. We simply cannot afford to keep buying weapons the Pentagon itself has said it does not want. As Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has testified, “some of the [Congressional Defense bills] seek to reverse the decisions to eliminate aging and lower priority ships and aircraft. My concern is that if these decisions are totally reversed, then I’ve got to find money somewhere to maintain this old stuff, where it’s got me in a situation where I’ve got to hollow out the force. We have got to be able to retire what is aged and what we can achieve some savings on.”

MYTH: China’s rapid militarization threatens American supremacy.

Reality: The truth is that China’s “rapid” militarization pales when compared to the current strength of the U.S. military. If the rest of the world combined its capability, the U.S. Navy could still carry twice as many aircraft at sea and have more nuclear-powered attack and cruise missile submarines. Secretary Gates has outlined that “in terms of total missile firepower, the U.S. arguably outmatches the next 20 largest navies. All told, the displacement of the U.S. battle fleet—a proxy for overall fleet capabilities—exceeds, by one recent estimate, at least the next 13 navies combined.” Today, the United States Air Force is the most technologically advanced military unit in the world, and General Schoomaker has called this Army the “the best led, trained and equipped Army that I’ve ever seen in the field.”

Lastly, it is important to note that China is seeking to be a regional power, not a global one. Moreover, China’s influence in the Asia Pacific is limited, as surrounding nations look to the U.S. as a balancer to China.

MYTH: The U.S. Navy is smaller than it’s been since 1917. Our Air Force is smaller and older than any time since 1947.

Reality: Counting the number of ships or aircraft is not a good measure of defense strength because their quality has increased dramatically in recent decades. As General Martin Dempsey highlights, “capability is more important than size,” and the U.S. military has drastically increased its effectiveness since 1917 or 1947 in terms of training, precision targeting, and missiles.

The independent fact checking website, PolitiFact, recently illustrated the ridiculousness of this myth. As they explain, in 1947, it took dozens of planes and literally hundreds of bombs to destroy a single target because they were so inaccurate. But thanks to smart bombs and stealthy aircraft, today it only takes a single plane and often a single bomb to destroy a target. To understand the absurdity of these historical comparisons, imagine someone arguing that the United States were weaker today than in 1941 because of the massive decrease in our horse-drawn cavalry regiments (we had 15 in 1941 and none today). Simply put, the weapons of today are stronger, smarter, more agile and require fewer platforms to deploy, making historical comparisons completely irrelevant.

MYTH: The last ten years of war severely stressed the military and left the equipment rundown. We need to “reset the force.”
Toward a World Free of Nuclear Weapons

by Dan Schlitt, Local Contact
Friends Committee on National Legislation

When the war is over, then there will be in all countries a pursuit of secret war preparations with technological means which will lead inevitably to 'preventive wars' and to destruction even more terrible than the destruction of life. The politicians do not appreciate the possibilities and consequently do not know the extent of the menace.

— December 1944 letter from Albert Einstein to physicist Niels Bohr

The prediction of a race for nuclear weapons came true on the part of the United States and the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. Other consequences happened in slow motion. France and the United Kingdom eventually joined the nuclear club. Other nations slowly followed. Small conventional wars occurred with the threat of nuclear weapons in the background. Only in the past decade (with the war on Iraq) did a 'preventive war' based on rumors of nuclear weapons come to pass.

We were fortunate that there was a movement that took advantage of the slowness and went in the opposite direction. Atmospheric testing came to an end. A broad international nonproliferation treaty was negotiated and placed in operation. A series of strategic arms reduction treaties (START) between the United States and the Soviet Union, and now Russia, slowly reduced the strategic nuclear weapons of the two countries.

We are now at a turning point however. We have a president who is publicly committed to moving toward a world free of nuclear weapons. He is joined in this by many faith leaders and many members of Congress and former Secretaries of State. On the other side, there are strong forces in Congress and the country not only resisting the reduction in our nuclear arsenal, but committed to increasing it.

The ratification of the New START treaty by the previous Senate is a base to build on. A next step is the ratification of the “Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty” by the Senate. Testing is a requirement for the development of new weapons. This treaty will strongly inhibit the development of new weapons by the current nuclear weapons states and by new nuclear-armed countries.

The U.S. was the first to sign the treaty in 1996 but the Senate has not ratified it. The treaty is not in full effect because it has not been ratified by the United States and seven other countries. Some of them are waiting for the U.S. to ratify it. The international monitoring system under the treaty has been operating for more than a decade. It has successfully detected all six nuclear tests conducted during that time. However, the on-site verification inspections that are an essential feature of the treaty cannot take place until the treaty is in full force.

The treaty is essential to moving toward a nuclear weapon-free world. For example, India—which is not a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty—is threatening to resume testing.

A second thing which needs support is the operation and funding of two programs, the “International Nuclear Materials Protection and Cooperation Program” and the “Global Threat Reduction Initiative.” The first protects nuclear materials and warheads at more than 100 sites, mostly in Russia. The second removed highly enriched uranium from 10 countries—enough to produce 16 nuclear weapons. These programs reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism. We are fortunate that Representative Jeff Fortenberry has taken the lead in preserving the funding for these programs.

Third, we need to reduce the spending on our own nuclear arsenal. We spend billions of dollars each year on this system to keep up, renovate and replace parts of the system. Everything from ballistic missile submarines and bombers to uranium processing facilities.

Of the roughly 20,000 nuclear weapons in the world, including around 5,000 operational strategic weapons, the United States and Russia have the bulk of them. If we are to make progress toward a nuclear weapons-free world, we must reduce these stockpiles. The “New START Treaty” makes some progress. But the numbers of weapons we have are far beyond any conceivable need and don’t justify the cost. Nevertheless, there are members of Congress who want to increase spending on them. In summary, here are the things that you can do to make this change possible:

Tell our Senators that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is important for our national security and they should vote to ratify it.

Tell our members of both houses of Congress that United States leadership in efforts to secure stockpiles of weapons grade nuclear materials is essential and they should provide the funds for this. Thank Representative Fortenberry for his efforts on this issue.

Tell our members of both houses of Congress that in this era of tight budgets we don’t need 1,500 deployed strategic nuclear weapons and to support proposals to cut tens of billions of dollars from this budget.

Tell the administration and Congress that diplomacy is the best way to solve conflicts over nuclear weapons with countries such as Iran and North Korea and to stop the loose talk in Congress that undermines these efforts.

Myths vs. Realities of Pentagon Spending, continued

Reality: In the past decade, the average soldier and unit has benefitted from better training, equipment, and technology, placing the military in excellent shape. Since 2001, the U.S. has spent roughly $1 trillion on defense procurement, for which funding has grown from $62.6B in FY01 to $135.8B in FY10 with the help of supplemental war funding.24 The military has used this spending to modernize its weapons, renovate and replace parts of operational strategic weapons, such as unmanned aerial vehicles.25

We have a new kind of military. We do not need to update the aircraft and equipment that we had in the past if they do not support the new kinds of missions we encounter today.

With the threats of the 21st century requiring a leaner, more agile military, the focus will be on superior technology and equipment that a smaller force can use. For instance, the Air Force contends that it can maintain America’s air superiority without increasing the size of its air fleet, as long as it is awarded unmanned aircraft.26 With more than $4.1 billion spent, unmanned aerial vehicles have increased since 9/11 from 60 to more than 6,000 today and are actively employed in all current combat missions.27
Global Warming Strikes Nebraska… Again

At a news conference July 16 in Omaha, retired National Weather Service meteorologist John Pollack outlined the role that human-caused Global Warming is playing in the extreme weather events that have struck our state the past two summers. Speaking down by the Missouri River, Pollack contrasted last year’s disastrous flooding from the massive snowmelt in the Rockies to the drought and record-setting temperatures that are now devastating the state.

Reprinted below is the statement Pollack delivered at the news conference, which was co-sponsored by 350.org—Nebraska, the Greater Omaha Area Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility and Nebraskans for Peace.

The recent weather disasters—our scorching heat wave, drought, western wildfires, derecho (direct, straight-line) windstorm, and even the early rash of tropical storms—all are part of a pattern made more frequent by Global Warming. This is the conclusion of 98 percent of the climate scientists who conduct research and publish in peer-reviewed journals on climate. Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/rick-perrys-made-up-facts-about-climate-change/2011/08/17/gIQApV-F5LJ_blog.html

Human-caused Global Warming has been worsening this large-scale weather pattern by pushing southern weather systems northward. This weather phenomenon is consistent with climate models that predict how rising carbon dioxide levels from fossil fuel burning will affect the Earth’s climate. This weather pattern, which has been very persistent over the U.S. since the beginning of 2012, has resulted in the warmest year since good records began in 1895, and has produced an expanding area of drought over much of the country. Abnormally dry conditions intensified the recent heat wave and allowed the hot air to spread across a large region.

This is what Global Warming looks like, and this is for the rest of our lives.

The recent heat wave set thousands of individual records from the Rockies to the East Coast. Omaha had a record high

**Unless we act soon, we will have a general warming of over four degrees Fahrenheit by mid-century, with even more extreme conditions in hotter years.**

of 104 on July 6, but also record warm minimum temperatures of 78 or 79 from July 4 through 6, as well as on June 18 and 27. This has also been the warmest start to any calendar year in Omaha. Western and central Nebraska were even hotter. McCook’s all-time high of 115 on June 26 was only 3 degrees shy of the state record.

The western wildfires were enhanced by very hot conditions and humidity as low as 4 percent. In addition, climate change and drought have been hard on trees, making them more susceptible to premature death through insect attack as well as disease.

The massive derecho windstorm that left many residents without power in a swath from Indiana to the Middle Atlantic States is a rare storm type associated with heat waves. The jet stream on the north side of the hot area helps to organize fast-moving thunderstorms with fierce winds.

As the subtropical high pressure zone moved northward into the U.S. much earlier than usual, it left a disturbed zone of lower pressure to its south. This zone acts as a breeding ground for tropical storms in the summer and fall, but it was activated weeks earlier than normal.

This year’s weather events are just a foretaste of what we face from Global Warming in the years ahead. The Earth is catching a fever. The average temperature during the past 12 months in the lower 48 states has been 2.9 degrees Fahrenheit above normal. While that may not seem all that significant, think of how your body feels with a 101.5 temperature, three degrees above our normal 98.6.

As a nation, we need to very quickly implement energy efficiency measures by insulating homes and businesses and shift to utilizing Nebraska’s vast renewable wind and solar energy resources—rather than rely on out-of-state coal and oil—for our energy supply. Unless we act soon, we will have a general warming of over four degrees Fahrenheit by mid-century, with even more extreme conditions in hotter years.

Hotter weather will be especially dangerous for agriculture in Nebraska. Higher temperatures, particularly when corn is pollinating, reduce the yields per acre. Livestock will also suffer losses. Nebraska’s bedrock industry is threatened. Wild changes in precipitation also threaten to cause damage to crops, structures, and the economy at large.

The effects of the wild changes in precipitation are clearly illustrated by the background statue, which was damaged last year when it was mostly covered by floodwater, but now is high and dry.
The Earth Can’t Wait for Political Twaddle

I read in the New York Times about the recent global conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro under the headline: “Global Economy Limits Expectations at Earth Summit in Brazil.” This conference was popularly styled “Rio+20,” after the “Earth Summit” that produced a global treaty on climate change in 1992, as well as an agreement to protect biodiversity. “The two accords have sweeping ambitions, but have yielded only modest results so far,” said the Times’ account.

If you think 1992’s results have been modest, take a look at this year’s. “There are few expectations for concrete actions,” the Times stated in its special ‘voice-of-God’ manner. As many as 50,000 people gathered in Rio for a mainly empty exercise, because concern about the future of the Earth these days seems, well… so yesterday. Due to global economic problems, the Earth has been told to wait. Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany skipped the conference (as did President Obama)—all preoccupied by domestic politics.

American Exceptionalism

William K. Reilly, who as head of the Environmental Protection Agency led the U.S. delegation to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 told the Times that “it was untenable for Mr. Obama to go, because he had no financial resources to offer and because he would face substantial criticism at home for seeming to be more concerned with global problems than domestic issues.” Now that’s quite an indictment of our political system.

Issues that will be important to future generations worldwide is an accident. Why consider real issues when we can play political games? As environmentalist Barry Commoner, running for U.S. president on the Citizens Party ticket in 1980, was asked by a reporter in Albuquerque: “Are you a serious candidate, or are you just running on the issues?”

Instead, we are being told that our warm winter recently has been good for business. People spend money when it’s warm. A front-page account in USA Today said that a record-warm spring “boosted tourism [and] bolstered everything from Florida visits by foreigners to ticket sales on Broadway,” according to the Federal Reserve’s “Beige Book.” The effect was temporary—the winter and early-spring surge has become a summer slump.

Concern about the future of the Earth these days seems, well… so yesterday. Due to global economic problems, the Earth has been told to wait.

The Corporate States of America

In the shorter term, given the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in “Citizens United,” our election cycle is now becoming a slow-motion coup. Perhaps, ultimately, the right-wing money blitz will lead us to the “Corporate States of America”—where everything is run as a business by an executive, legislators and Supreme Court staffed by people with business experience under the ‘Romney Amendment.’

Anyone who owns shares in a public company is familiar with the model—one vote per share of assets (regardless, of course, of race, creed, gender or sexual orientation) with a single slate of candidates. Anyone who complains that the single slate sounds something like how the Soviets ‘elected’ leaders under Stalin will be gently reminded that at least the “C.S.A.” doesn’t tote you off to the gulag for not voting the right—and only—way.

Petitions may be allowed, of course, but as in today’s corporate ‘elections,’ the board of directors will advise everyone how to vote. Since voting power is calibrated by asset ownership, such advice will hardly be necessary. Look at the CSA as one gigantic Super-PAC.

With such a system, the ostentatious spending of Super-PACs would no longer be needed. How much money do corporate directors waste running for office? Our corporate-compliant Congress could turn its energy to looking for innovative ways to pad company balance sheets in the CSA, where, more than ever, the business of America would be business.

How about private ventures that resurrect the debtors’ prisons of yore? We have plenty of debt.
Planting for the Future

A ‘Hamlet’ Takes Root in Lincoln

by Tim Rinne

It wasn’t until the personal implications of climate change began to dawn on me—how it would disrupt my daily routine and the world I took for granted—that the full horror of our situation finally sunk in.

I’d already been fuming over the perils of global warming and our dependence on fossil fuels for a decade by then, prevailing on my friends about my concerns, pondering whether I ought to move my family north to a rainier climate. In my anxiety about needing to do something to avert this coming calamity, I’d gotten myself elected to the Executive Committee of the Nebraska Sierra Club and was chairing its Political and Legislative Committee. As NFP’s State Coordinator, I’d made sure Nebraskans for Peace was doing its part as well, ‘connecting the dots’ between climate disruption and social conflict (such as we’re already seeing in Africa with the wars over water and food). Humanity, Al Gore warned in his 2007 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, had begun to “wage war on the Earth,” which only confirmed in my mind that you couldn’t find a more foundational ‘peace issue’ than climate change—because if we don’t have a habitable place to live, all other peace and justice concerns become moot.

For a full ten years, I’d been obsessing about the climate threat on an intellectual, theoretical level. And then, suddenly, in early 2009, it hit me.

Right in the stomach.

I didn’t have the first clue about my food supply. Where it came from and how it was grown.

Now, I’m a fifth-generation Nebraskan, whose immigrant ancestors homesteaded in the state in 1868. Both my parents were farm kids who grew up in homes without electricity or running water. But I’ve lived in towns and cities my entire life and had no idea how chickens laid the eggs I ate, the wheat for my bread got planted, harvested and milled, or one preserved the surplus so that there’s something in the larder to eat during the winter. Like that glib consumer adage goes: I was doing all my ‘hunting and fishing’ at the supermarket—letting someone else worry about my food supply. My paltry 10 x 20-foot garden patch where I grew my spindly Roma tomatoes didn’t count.

Here we were as a nation: facing ‘peak oil’ (that tipping point where the available supply of this finite fuel is diminishing even as global demand rises); risking ‘runaway climate change’ with our addiction to said oil and coal; slashing government services for the many (including nutritional programs for the young, the poor and the unemployed) to favor the rich; all the while skirting the edges of an international economic meltdown that will pop the bubble of our consumer lifestyle...

And here I was: in my 50s; totally reliant on someone else to stock my refrigerator and provide for my daily sustenance; spending what time I did spend outside in the yard mowing my inedible lawn and tending my inedible ornamentals; devoid of practical skills and totally ignorant of how to go about feeding myself and my family.

Inklings of a Plan

Although I’d toyed with the idea for years, buying some land and moving to the country wasn’t a viable option. Both my wife Kay and I worked in downtown Lincoln, less than a mile from our home, and we concluded that the carbon footprint of commuting back and forth every day would only compound our ecological woes. Besides, as I indicated, I don’t have the skill set to run an acreage. I’m not mechanical and am the furthest thing from a handyman.

A view of the half-acre neighborhood garden and orchard in our city block which encompasses several backyards. Eighteen different households from our ‘hamlet’ are participating in this local food-growing project. All photos by Doug Boyd.

About this time, however, a close friend of ours—NFP State Board member Linda Ruchala, who shared our global warming anxieties—happened upon a workshop on ‘Co-housing and Intentional Communities’ at a Unitarian Universalist conference. Linda was smitten with the idea of a group of like-minded people choosing to live in close proximity to each other in order to share resources and lessen our
load on the planet. After looking at some directions taken by co-housing projects and talking the idea over with us, the idea of ‘re-purposing’ an older neighborhood like the one we live in seemed the most sensible course. So, Linda sold her home in south Lincoln and moved into our block, just one door down.

Suddenly, we’d doubled our numbers. A seed was taking root.

Then Kay and I decided to mortgage our home to purchase and renovate a ‘problem property’ on the block four doors away from us, with the idea of establishing a neighborhood garden there (as soon as the lease for the existing tenants was up). Our property stake in the block—for this co-housing project—increased again, this time by a third, though we didn’t yet have any clear vision of what it was we could actually do.

Somewhere in my browsings, though, I’d stumbled across the concept of ‘edible landscaping’ and discovered a book on the subject by the same name. At one point in the text, the author, Rosalind Creasy, posed a question that was to forever change Kay’s and my life (not to mention our lawn and yard). “Why,” she asked, “do we always plant things we can’t eat?”

I thought of my considerable corner lot. For 22 years, I’d dutifully mowed my grass (though never watered or fertilized it, because that just makes it grow again) and meticulously tended my trees and bushes—not one of which produced edible fruits or berries. In my entire yard, apart from my little tomato plot, there wasn’t a single food plant. And “Why?” I wondered. Peach and cherry trees produce blossoms that are every bit as lovely as those of ornamentals—and you get something to eat besides. Strawberry beds make a lovely ground cover, and the berries provide a delightful enticement to everyone who walks by.

A fiendishly diabolical plan began forming in my mind.

Our home, I vowed, was going to become a lawn-free edible landscape—even the public right-of-way area, what city ordinance calls the ‘sidewalk space.’ Kay and I would create of model of what a food-producing urban lot could look like that other people (once they saw it and got over the shock) could emulate and adapt for their own properties. Nobody has to move to the country—and most of us can’t, anyway.

We can stay right where we’re at, and turn that prime agricultural land that’s currently being squandered on grass into edibles for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The Making of an Urban Gardener

That first gardening season in 2009, half of my lawn got seeded under and planted in vegetables, with the remainder falling to the spade the following year. But I quickly learned how much I didn’t know. Terms like ‘Blossom End Rot,’ ‘Powdery Mildew’ and the pernicious and to-be-feared ‘Mexican Bean Beetle’ soon had me beating a path to Earl May Nursery for advice on pests and diseases. What I really needed though, Kay wisely counseled, if I seriously intended to garden on this domestic scale, was a “Master Gardener” course of study through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Cooperative Extension Service.

So I promptly enrolled and learned more in the first four months of 2010 than I’d absorbed in my previous 30 years as a homeowner. I even passed the final exam (though it was, admittedly, ‘open book’ and ‘open neighbor’)—dually earning my Master Gardener certification. (And I have not only the certificate, but the badge and the T-shirt to prove it!) The class, though, was so monumentally informative for a mere English Major like myself, that I’d benefit from taking it all over again. As I tell people, if I qualify as a ‘Master Gardener,’ with the little knowledge and experience I’ve got, ain’t none of us gonna leave the table with a full stomach. I need lots more guidance and practice before I flaunt my badge and wear my T-shirt in public.

While Kay and I were developing our edible landscape, Linda and her husband Ed Long were remodeling their new home and hadn’t had time yet to sort out what they were going to do with their yard. But anxious to try her luck at gardening, she and another neighbor obtained permission to develop a community garden space in the empty backyard of yet another neglected property, adjacent to the one Kay and I had bought. The soil was awful—mostly chip paths. When our curious neighbors saw me setting out 150 strawberry plants that first year, to a person, they asked what I thought I was going to do with all those berries. “Am I the only person on this block who likes strawberries?” I remember replying. And not a single neighbor, I might add, refused the three quarts we distributed equally among the participating households earlier this spring.

Then, last summer, as we hoped would happen, the problem property used for the original community garden came available and Linda and Ed were able to acquire the property, adding a fourth lot to our co-housing project. They are now embarked on the same grueling renovation process of the house that Kay and I went through on our property. But the backyard of Linda and Ed’s has already been integrated into the neighborhood garden, and today we’ve got 25 fruit and nut trees growing in the neighborhood orchard, with four grape arbors and six berry patches.

And, like magic, the transformation we are effecting on our properties is spreading to the rest of the block. The only remaining investor owner has not only been inspired to rebuild the front porch and side the house of his rental property, he offered us a sizable chunk of his backyard for more growing space. Two more owner occupants across the alley, whose health conditions prohibit their getting out in the soil to garden, spontaneously offered us access to their backyards as well. So, for the use of their properties, the rest of us are sharing the surplus vegetables and fruits we’re growing in our own plots.

Modeling for the Community

All told, 18 different families from our block and across the street are now participating in our half-acre-sized neighborhood garden. Everyone has their individual vegetable plot; we jointly share the fruit harvest from the neighborhood orchard; and in the three ‘donated’ backyards, we’ve established a corn patch, bean patch and potato patch that we’ll annually rotate—with the harvest shared equally among the neighbors. A half-acre-plus garden in one city block may sound like a lot, but as we all tend to eat three meals a day and the so-called ‘calorie crops’ of corn, beans and potatoes take up a lot of space to grow, we’re always on the look-out for more ground. So, we’re also encouraging our gardening neighbors to think about spading up some of their own lawn to grow food there as well.

For instance, Kay’s and my next door neighbor, Barrie, has consented to put a couple of fruit trees on his property that will count towards the neighborhood or-
A ‘Hamlet’ Takes Root in Lincoln, conclusion

charged. Although he stipulated that one of them be an apricot, I knew he’d be an ‘easy sell’ on the fruit trees, because I’d already convinced him to help me keep chickens. Since May 2011, Barrie, his boarder Pat and I have been the proud papas of four absolutely adorable Rhode Island Reds: “Billina” (aka “the little stinker”), “Ruby” (the noble leader of the roost), and “The Twindles, Flopsy and Mopsy” (who I can’t tell apart, but whose combs both flop over). They’re all molting right now, poor things, but, like clockwork, they each faithfully provide an egg every 30 hours, which keeps both of our households amply supplied.

And thanks to Linda, I’ve lightened up a bit on my gardening expectations. When we first launched the co-housing gardening project, I was pretty hardcore about everyone growing food. Flowers were frowned upon, as we needed that ground for edibles. But then Linda got me interested in bees (we’re actually taking a class on bee-keeping through Southeast Community College) and I quickly realized how critical flowers are to our bee friends. “Of the 100 crop species that provide 90 percent of the world’s food,” the United Nations reports, “over 70 are pollinated by bees.” And with “Colony Collapse Disorder” still devastating hives around the world, anything we can do to aid and encourage our bee sisters and brothers—including growing flowers to provide them nectar—is a good thing. Linda and I set up our first hive in April, and so far things appear to be going well. The bees are building up their stores of honey and seem to like all the forage we’ve provided for them—particularly the clover we’ve planted as a cover crop wherever it’s too shady or there are too many tree roots to grow food or flowers.

Kay and I also have been concentrating on turning our hundred-and-five-year-old house (as well as our yard) into a ‘green’ residence that can serve as a model for others. In 2009, we installed a geo-thermal heating and cooling system in the house (the first such older home in Lincoln to be so retrofitted) and saw our utility bills drop by 60 percent. And just last month, we installed roof-top solar panels on our home (also the first such older home in Lincoln to be so retrofitted), which will just about reduce our net energy dependence on the Lincoln Electric System to zero. We’ve also insulated our walls, installed energy efficient lighting and low-flush toilets throughout the house, and have rain barrels on every downspout to collect water (that is, if it should rain again in this globally with no heat source other than the sun. After two winters of gardening in our unheated conservatory, I can personally attest that it is indeed possible to grow cool weather crops like lettuce and spinach, scallions, radishes and carrots throughout the winter months. Fresh greens make a welcome addition to the table in the dead of winter. But as most people aren’t in a position to add a greenhouse to their home, we’ve also erected a simple 15 x 30-foot ‘hoop house’ in the neighborhood garden that cost us less than $1,000 in materials. With just transparent plastic sheeting for a cover, we’ll be able to grow salad greens for the neighbors in the block long after the first frost has ended the gardening season outside.

This picture of our Lincoln home shows the attached conservatory (or greenhouse) on the left, half of our rooftop solar panel array, and a portion of the ‘edible landscape’ that comprises our yard.

For the first couple years, we’d described what we were creating as a ‘village’: working with our next door neighbors to grow food for our tables right in our own block. But a ‘village’ always sounded a bit presumptuous to me. What we were doing seemed more from something as glamorous as a village. So on a whim, I went on the internet and googled ‘hamlet.’ A hamlet, I discovered on Wikipedia, is too small to have a church like a village does, but it might have a mill. That definition sounded right on target. We’ll never have a church on our block, but someday soon we might well mill some of the meal corn were growing to make cornbread, polenta and tortillas. Living as we do in the “Hawley Historic District” just a mile from downtown, we now accordingly refer to our block and the homes right across the street from us as the “Hawley Hamlet.”

Everything I’ve described here we’ve done on our own—without government assistance. It’s a self-initiated, self-supported project and it’s our goal to have hamlets just like ours springing up all over Nebraska’s capital. Of course every other hamlet will have its own unique identity as no two blocks are alike. But the features that make this hamlet concept so attractive in an urban setting can be replicated everywhere: building bonds with your neighbors as you collaboratively grow food, make optimal use of our local resources and, thereby, lighten our footprint on our overstrained ecosystem.

And gardening, I can tell you, is a veritable magnet for meeting your neighbors. In 30 years of political organizing, I’ve never seen anything break down barriers and foster dialogue like growing food (particularly in the public sidewalk space—where everybody can see what you’re doing when they walk by). In the first 22 years that Kay and I lived in our block, we knew maybe one or two of our neighbors by name. Today, after just three years of working to build the hamlet, there are no strangers. We know everybody. And we need to, because with the challenges climate change is foisting on our communities, we’re going to need the help of our neighbors like never before. We’re simply not going to make it trying to go it alone.

For a Peace & Justice organization like NFP, it’s critical that we continue to ‘connect the dots’ on the human role in global warming and lobby for policies that will enable us to mitigate the very worst scenarios. But some things about climate change it’s already too late to reverse. The damage is already done and we’re just going to have to live with it—like the long bouts of drought with blazing hot temperatures, broken only by an infrequent trace of taunting rain or destructive cloudburst that brings more moisture than we need or can handle.

So it’s going to be up to activists like ourselves to model for our neighbors how we can begin adapting to the changes that are already occurring—starting with our own properties and the blocks we live on.

And the place where it all begins, fittingly enough, is in the garden.
Myths vs. Realities of Pentagon Spending, conclusion

14 CNN: Obama Unveils Plans for Pared-down Military
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22 New York Times: Defense Budget Limits Reach of a Campaign Promise for the Navy
23 PolitiFact: Mitt Romney says U.S. Navy is smallest since 1917, Air Force is smallest since 1947
24 Wired: Pentagon Looks to Double Its Unmanned

What’s HOT, conclusion

We could fill them with unemployed college graduates who can’t repay their student loans, and put them to work making iPhones for the minimum wage.

All hail the Corporate States of America! Elections soon will be lipstick on the pig of oligarchic fascism. I wish it weren’t so, but I, alas, can’t afford to buy my own politicians.

Those who are staging this coup are buying no time for our collective future on our one Earth. Within a few decades, Earth will have the last word, no matter how many TV ads the Koch brothers, Adelson and Omaha’s own Joe Ricketts buy to install the government of their choice. Without a sustainable environment, the Kochs’ progeny will sing no songs and do no business, unless they build a gated community with an artificial atmosphere on the Moon.

REFERENCE

Bruce E. Johansen is Jacob J. Isaacs Professor at the UNO and author of The Encyclopedia of Global Warming Science and Technology (2009).
Recently, the Lincoln NFP Chapter hosted a picnic for my 80th birthday. After the picnic, I wrote to the picnickers:

My life has been all war. I was born in 1932, the year before Hitler came to power, and I vaguely remember the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935), the Spanish power, and I vaguely remember the Italian invasion in 1932, the year before Hitler came to power.

Also if you made a will out some time ago, it may be time to update that as things may have changed. So even if you have a will, you should review it and see if it is still relevant to your financial and family situation today.

Whether you are starting from scratch, or revising an existing will, please consider including Nebraskans for Peace and/or the Nebraska Peace Foundation in your will. Talk with a tax advisor to see which is best for your situation.

The rest of my life has been wars and cold wars—tens of millions of lives lost in World War II and Korea, in the Chinese civil war and its accompanying famines, in the gulags and manufactured disappearances in Asia, South America and Africa, and in surrogate wars partially created by American pawns all over the world (Iraq, Vietnam, Central America, Chile and Africa). Now we create new monsters on the Middle Eastern and Chinese horizons.

My father—a largely uneducated but bright man, lay clergyman, farmer and janitor—spoke often of the 1930s Gandhi. Later, as a teenager, I came across Tolstoy’s nonviolent writings, and went on to read Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, and Marx’s The Civil War in France. (Very recently Gene Sharp’s works and the powerful witness of the ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ commissions in South Africa and Rwanda have excited me.)

In the ’60s, I acted—very late—on the decrees of conscience that these writers prompted. I was inspired by a host of ’60s Nebraskans (I have mentioned them in my history of Nebraskans for Peace) and by many witnesses from times before: the Nebraska Quakers and Mennonites; William Jennings Bryan and George Norris; Herbert Jehle, the great Nebraska physicist. At 80, I believe that we rarely can use violence to achieve justice. The one ‘war’ that might have been ‘just’ would have been an intervention in Rwanda during the genocide. We did nothing.

I could have added that in 2012 we have achieved a state of near perpetual war, intensifying the fires of conflict that have surrounded my life: consider our wars in Pakistan, Yemen, Iran, Iraq and, by indirectness, in Syria.

None of these is a legally declared war. None has been the subject of a congressional or national debate. Why?

Rachel Maddow’s Drift: the Unmooring of American Military Policy attempts an answer.

(Maddow, I should note, is no pacifist. She, as David Swanson’s review of her book documents, fails to look at U.S. wars from the perspective of their multitudinous civilian victims, ignores the roles of nonviolent resistance and mediation in resolving national disputes, rationalizes our entrance into Vietnam, trivializes the ’60s anti-war movement, and largely legitimizes the war-making tendencies of George H. W. Bush and Barack Obama.)

Maddow argues, plausibly, that we and Congress have lost constitutional control over the military. The founding fathers, in writing the Constitution and setting early policy, argued that declaring war should be a gut-wrenching decision, undertaken after serious national and congressional debate, and done with the full approval of the larger share of the American people. The fathers were tired of professional armies and of monarchic/dynastic battles, undertaken on the say-so of a king or professional Junker-style generals from the Prussian Empire. So they said, “No wars without a national and Congressional debate.”

But, as Maddow shows, the mantra now is, “Wars all the time and no national debate.” First, as the executive, you lie to enable them; and, second—to continue them—you minimize the endangerment of most of the American population, no matter what happens to populations elsewhere. Lies to enable wars, as Maddow does not note, have existed almost forever in this country: the deceptions in the Indian Wars; possibly the “Maine” episode prior to the Spanish-American War; certainly the “Lusitania” one prior to WWI; Roosevelt’s claim of surprise at the