

Vote no on Proposition 7

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It's hard not to like the outlines of Proposition 7, a ballot measure that would push California to shift sharply from fossil fuels to renewable energy. The timing - with \$4 gas, a move to offshore drilling, and a lopsided dependence on foreign oil - couldn't be better in a state shaping a clean-and-green future.

But this measure runs a good cause off the cliff. It forces the state to change energy habits on an unrealistic timetable, draws up complex rules at the ballot box instead of through the legislative process, and ignores a chance to work with the state's wide circle of environmentalists and power companies.

The measure is the do-good brainchild of a billionaire family that founded the for-profit University of Phoenix. John Sperling and his son Peter have a background in liberal and environmental causes and are major backers of Prop. 7. To their credit, they don't stand to advantage themselves as Texas oilman T. Boone Pickens does with the deeply flawed Proposition 10, which taps state bond money to help his natural gas company fuel cars.

But good intentions take Prop. 7 only so far. It sets a goal to produce half of the state's electricity needs by 2025. Right now, California is at the 11 percent level with a pledge to raise this to 20 percent by 2010. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants to boost this number to 33 percent by 2020 as part of a multisided effort to rein in greenhouse gas emissions.

These existing targets put the state in the forefront of the country and world in switching to clean energy. By comparison, Prop. 7 is late to the party. California is already leading the way and pushing producers, small and large, to change the way electricity is produced.

Prop. 7 digs its hole deeper. It reassigns bureaucratic duties to approving new power lines (needed to wheel in juice from huge solar farms in the Southern California desert) and contains contentious language that could leave out small power producers from being counted toward the 50 percent clean-energy goal. Another weak point: There would be a 3 percent cap on renewable energy increases, but no such limit on fossil-fuel boosts. Why leave this loophole for big energy suppliers to exploit?

These small-type disputes could well be Example A in a textbook study on why the ballot box, not the deliberations of a legislative panel or rule-making commission, is the wrong way to forge significant public policy. Prop. 7 backers argue that big power companies shut off any move toward forcing higher renewable goals.

But that's plainly not the case as California moves in myriad ways toward cleaner tailpipe emissions, solar panel subsidies and energy-efficient land use. It's fashionable and easy to blame state lawmakers for all that ails California, but on global warming the statehouse and governor have worked together on a complicated and crucial issue.

There's also a been-there, done-that quality to the debate over Prop. 7. In 2000 and 2001, the state went through months of power shortages, brought on partly by an energy deregulation plan. Now, here we are again with a huge makeover that claims to supply lots of answers to complex issues in a huge state. Voters should think twice about embracing an energy cure-all that commits the state to a lofty goal.

If the arguments over energy policy aren't convincing, consider the political lineup on Prop. 7. A strange-bedfellows alliance of power companies, environmental groups, labor and business organizations are opposing it. The supporters, along with the big-spending Sperling clan, are only a handful of players.

This measure has arrived on the ballot without the broad consultation, input and tinkering that makes for good public policy. Since when did the California ballot get to be a playground for rich dilettantes trying out pet causes?

The challenge of switching California to renewable electricity supplies needs continued work. But a one-shot ballot measure will only make this task worse. Vote no on Prop. 7.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/05/ED7D137S5T.DTL>

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