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Op-ed: Rooftop solar's worth? Don't forget the value of saving the Earth

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In meeting rooms, council chambers, and at the Utah State Legislature, the question is being asked; What is the "value" of rooftop solar? When rooftop solar systems generate more power than a home is using, the electricity goes back into the grid and the utility buys it. This process is called net-metering. The value of that electricity is now the topic of important energy pricing debates. The higher dollar value of solar energy, the more affordable rooftop solar systems are to Utah families.

The equations used to determine the value of net-metering calculate costs such as the price of generating and delivering energy. However, one factor has been conspicuously absent from Utah's discussions: the net benefit of rooftop solar's critical environmental contributions.

Those environmental benefits are difficult to calculate, but certainly not impossible. In 2014, Minnesota utility regulators studied the full costs and benefits of rooftop solar systems. The Minnesota study calculated an "avoided environmental cost." This includes the money that a society saves when power comes from solar panels instead of burning fossil fuels. It considers everything from healthier families to negating the effects of climate change. More solar means less carbon and that means cleaner air, fewer health/air related ailments, more productive farms, and fewer natural disasters.

Here's another way to look at this. The way we're making power now, by burning fossil fuels, is already costing society a not-so-small pile of money. When coal power emissions trigger an asthma attack for a child with Medicaid health benefits and she ends up in an emergency room, we all pay the bill. When a coastal community in Florida is forced to spend tens of millions to build walls and pipes to keep rising sea waters at bay, we pay the bill. When rising temperatures force millions of Americans to use their air conditioners for more hours on more days, we pay the bill. All because we have increased carbon dioxide in our atmosphere from burning coal.

But none of those costs appear on your electricity bill. Economists call them an "externality." This is defined as a cost suffered by a third party as a result of an economic transaction. The third party in this case is all of us.

Since those "externalities" don't appear on your bills, fossil fuel fired electricity prices are kept artificially low. Utilities that depend on fossil fuels – such as Rocky Mountain Power which burns coal and natural gas for about three-fourths of their electricity -- are effectively getting a free ride and forcing the public to pay the cost, both in terms of actual cash and health care costs.

When a study like Minnesota's acknowledges that solar saves society money by avoiding fossil fuel's true costs, it boosts the value of developing solar, today. That keeps rooftop solar affordable to families that are deciding whether they want to install panels, boost their self-reliance, increase the value of their home — and do their part to protect public health and the environment.

As appointed commissions and elected officials around Utah grapple with putting an appropriate value on rooftop solar, they must remember: The true cost of how we power our modern world is complicated. If we continue to ignore the real costs, we are all going to pay a much greater price down the road — sacrificing both our dollars and our health.

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