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## UI promises to stop coal use by 2017, take other steps to lower energy use

Tue, 05/25/2010 - 8:00am | [Julie Wurth](#)

URBANA – The University of Illinois pledges to stop using coal within seven years as part of a plan to reduce energy use and cut carbon emissions .

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The plan was developed by the campus Sustainability Council, co-chaired by interim Chancellor Robert Easter and Dick Warner, director of the UI [Office of Sustainability](#). It was submitted to the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, signed by more than 600 schools. The UI is the first Big Ten school to formally submit a climate plan, Warner said.

Former Chancellor Richard Herman announced broad conservation goals two years ago after signing the climate commitment, and the Sustainability Council was asked to develop more specific target dates and strategies.

The plan calls for the campus to be "carbon neutral" by 2050 – to have a zero net impact on carbon emissions.

Other goals include:

- Using renewable energy for a quarter of the campus energy needs by 2025, in line with state standards.
- Significantly reducing emissions from transportation (by up to half) by 2025.
- Implementing a campus bicycling master plan and creating a bike-sharing program by 2012. It also so encourages alternative ways of commuting and telecommuting.
- Requiring all new buildings and major renovations to meet the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Gold Standards by 2011.

"We think the goals we put out in this agreement are much better informed," Warner said.

During the first seven months of this fiscal year, energy consumption is down by 9.5 percent, saving an estimated \$4 million, he noted.

The campus burned 94,171 tons of coal in fiscal 2009, although that figure has dropped 30 percent in fiscal 2010 so far, said Tom Abram, sustainability coordinator in UI Facilities and Services.

How will the UI cut its reliance on coal? By using less through conservation and by developing alternative fuels that could be used by Abbott Power Plant or another central generation facility, officials said.

University buildings – which account for 85 percent of the campus's energy use – are primarily heated by steam produced at Abbott. The plant also produces electricity as a byproduct, with the UI buying additional electricity from private suppliers, Abram said.

Abbott runs primarily on natural gas and coal, with the fuel mix decided by market costs – which don't take global warming or other environmental costs into consideration, Abram said.

The sustainability team concluded that Abbott's natural gas capacity can provide almost enough steam to meet campus demand by itself and should be able to do so in a few years if conservation trends continue, Abram said.

By 2012, the campus will complete a study on possible alternative fuels, such as biomass, hot-water distribution, geothermal and regeneration systems, he said.

The campus is exploring several options, "but all of them currently include some sort of a central system," he said.

"We will be moving to renewable fuels regardless," Abram said, and that's likely to include additional wind turbines, solar electric and thermal systems, methane and biomass.

Abbott has a backlog of about \$177 million in deferred maintenance, and the hope is to avoid a "significant amount" of that on the coal-fired side, Abram said.

"We'll do the least we need to do to keep burning coal until 2017," Warner said.

That 2017 date was an aggressive but reasonable target, said Steve Sonka, vice chancellor for public engagement, who oversees the Office of Sustainability. It could change as the campus works through the first few years of the plan, he said.

Sonka also expects objections from the coal industry.

"We'd like to figure out a cleaner way to use coal as a resource," he said, adding that "there are much bigger players in the world using coal than us."

The plan doesn't contain any cost estimates, though the next round of planning will be more cost-specific, Warner said. The idea is that any upfront investments will be recouped in annual energy savings from conservation, though that depends on the price of energy, he said.

Neither the national climate commitment nor the plan itself includes any penalties if the targets aren't met. But the goals are meant to expedite work already being done on campus and will also be included in the UI's strategic plan and tied to employee performance, Abram said.

"Our intention is to meet these goals," he said.

The UI will be required to provide updates to the climate commitment group and reassess its goals, he added.

"It's obviously not as aggressive as we would like it to be, but it's a good plan," said Suhail Barot, a graduate engineering student and president of the student sustainability committee, who helped draft the climate plan. "It sets some good targets."

"We're going to continue to work on trying to get more aggressive targets, and hold the university to commitments made," Barot said.

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#1

[myattitude](#) wrote on May 25, 2010 at 4:05 pm

They have done all this switching in the past and I doubt they will make much progress with renewable energy such as wind as people start to realize the issues with it. This sounds good and I applaud the efforts to make modifications to buildings as energy efficient as possible but the renewable idea is a long way from reality on the scale needed.

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