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An important first step in kicking oil habit

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The goal of having 70 percent of Hawaii's energy produced by renewable sources in just over 20 years suddenly seems more realistic.

The state and Hawaiian Electric Co. essentially said this week that the future for power is in the wind. They announced that HECO will buy about 400 megawatts, close to one-third of the electricity the utility sells on Oahu, that will be generated on wind farms on Maui, Molokai and Lanai.

The concept is bold and exciting. It's apparently also doable, at least based on the success of current and planned wind farms on Maui. Right now, Hawaii is 90 percent dependent on oil for power.

Connecting the islands would be an underwater cable, creating the first interisland electric grid in the state.

Before we get too excited, though, we would like to see more definitive information about that cable and how much it will cost.

The idea of an under-ocean electrical cable isn't totally new. Castle & Cooke proposed one that would bring power from its Lanai windmills to Oahu and maintained the plan was financially viable.

Even if the state is able to secure federal grants for the windmills and grid, ratepayers still would pay for much of a new system, presumably with a price tag in the hundreds of millions, possibly into the billions. That's the elephant in the room and it won't go away until more information is available.

But the package unveiled Monday does offer a lot of reason for optimism.

It's an unprecedented agreement between a private business, HECO, and the state in offering a realistic vision on the direction of electric power between now and 2030. It further reinforces that HECO will become more of a distributor of electric power, not just a creator of it.

The plan selects wind as the preferred alternative energy source, at least for this project. Wind has a track record in Hawaii and if the grid concept works, it can provide power to where it's really needed, on Oahu.

There are other clean-energy incentives encouraging off-peak power usage, solar water heating and electric vehicles. HECO commits to converting traditional oil-fired generators to ones that run on renewable biofuels.

We hope the state government is ready for a concept and project this massive.

Hawaii is famous for the length of its permitting process and without some kind of expediting, it could take 20

years just to get through the regulatory jungle. Also, if there are going to be significant changes in the way HECO is compensated, as proposed, the Public Utilities Commission must start addressing that now.

But the vision of a Hawaii freed from almost total dependence on oil and coal is exciting and we commend the state and the utility for taking these important first steps.

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