



Texas Bishops Statement on Coal Fired Plants

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The Roman Catholic Bishops of Texas seek to offer a constructive contribution to the current and important state debate regarding coal-fired plants. We participate neither as climate experts nor as scientists, but rather as pastors and teachers who are concerned that the moral and human dimensions of these decisions could be overwhelmed by political, economic or ideological pressures. As the population of Texas increases and our reliance on energy grows, it is becoming increasingly clear that our state may need to reduce total energy consumption while adopting alternative energy sources and technologies that are more environmentally sound. Texas is already home to five of the ten top mercury-emitting power plants in the country and the current debate over the proposals to build multiple coal-fired plants in our state has heightened awareness to the human and environmental impact of such plants. We hope this will be a time for our state to come together across partisan, ideological and interest groups lines to address the moral, human and environmental challenges facing our entire community. We ask Texas leaders to adopt policy measures that reflect a framework of principles drawn from four major themes of Catholic Social Teaching and our pastoral experience:

Upholding the Right to Life: It is clear that no overall energy strategy is free from risk to human life. The proposed coal plants, however, could pose significant health problems such as increased susceptibility to bacterial infection and increased cases of asthma. The Church is deeply committed to the protection of human life and the advancement of the common good in the approach to energy. Mercury levels in the air and water pose a particular risk to unborn life, which is of deep concern to the Church. Energy planners and those in authority must do all in their power to safeguard human life.

A Priority for the Poor: We are deeply concerned that the poor and vulnerable in our community will have little or no voice in this vital discussion. Their needs and burdens are likely to be ignored or overwhelmed by more powerful interests. The plants will release sulfur dioxide and nitrous oxides—pollutants which are a particular problem for poor families and children, vulnerable workers, and farmers. They are more likely to be in jobs where they work outside performing physically active tasks in the outdoors, and it is often harder for them to obtain asthma treatments. Currently, because of their costs, energy efficiency programs are disproportionately available only to people who can afford them. Low-income and middle income households would actually benefit the most from the reductions in their utility bills through these energy efficiency programs. Every effort should therefore be made to ensure that poor and middle income families have access to the same energy efficiency strategies as wealthier families. Furthermore, we should ensure that programs designed to assist low-income families with heating and cooling bills are adequately funded.

The Pursuit of the Common Good: The challenge of seeking new sources of energy is a pre-eminent example of how our civic debate and decisions should reflect the pursuit of the common good, rather than the narrow search for economic or political advantage. Our obligation to pass on the gift of God's creation to future generations without doing irreversible harm is but one aspect of the demands of the common good. Equally important is the need for all Texans to have access to clean air, land, and water. We urge our leaders to resist and restrain predictable interest group pressures and narrow appeals. Instead, we urge them to help build up common ground for reasonable and effective initiatives for energy conservation and the development of alternate renewable and clean energy resources.

The Practice of Prudence: The traditional virtue of prudence calls for caution in accepting a more prominent role for coal in Texas' future. The Church cannot ignore the economic benefits that coal may offer; but neither can the Church ignore coal's attendant dangers to human health and environment. If a commitment to coal is made, it should be balanced by a simultaneous commitment to reduce emissions, improve mine safety and adopt and enforce strict ecological and community protection standards. The review process of the state should ensure that a margin of error is provided to protect human health. Additionally, where significant uncertainty exists on pollution impacts of a facility the most cautionary approach should be adopted.

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Legislative Recommendations

We believe that the moral measure of the decisions on coal plants will be determined by how we act to protect God’s creation, advance the “common good,” and alleviate the ways in which our energy policies burden the poor and the vulnerable. We conclude our statement with three recommendations:

1. Lawmakers should commit to a clean, affordable and reliable energy future for Texas by increasing electric generation from clean, safe, renewable sources and by committing to develop the necessary infrastructure to ensure that energy from our state’s abundant wind and solar resources is available to residents throughout the state.
2. Legislators should enact legislation that directs the responsible state agencies to adopt a measured and deliberate approach for consideration of all permit applications for the construction of new generating facilities, and to ensure that the permit process includes a full review of the health, environmental and global warming implications of the technologies proposed along with comprehensive analyses of alternative strategies and their comparative costs and benefits. A slower review process should also include more time for public input and examination of permits.
3. We call on energy leaders to balance the needs and burdens of the poor with the demands for cleaner energy alternatives. One option to achieve this is to ensure that tax policies and other incentives are structured so that clean energy alternatives can be priced competitively with fossil fuel generation.

The Texas Catholic Conference will work with legislative leaders to address environmental justice within this framework and on these principles. We do so with modesty and respect. While no one has easy answers, we ask you to help define and refine what prudence and the pursuit of the common good require. We seek your help in lifting up and focusing on how our sources of energy production will affect the “least among us” — the poor, the vulnerable and the voiceless in our community and around the world. We particularly call for leadership in shaping responses that respect and protect the lives and the dignity of poor families and children.

Approved by The Roman Catholic Bishops of Texas: Archbishop Jose H. Gomez, San Antonio; Archbishop Daniel N. DiNardo, Galveston-Houston; Bishop Gregory Aymond, Austin; Bishop Edmond Carmody, Corpus Christi; Bishop Alvaro Corrada del Rio, S.J., Tyler; Bishop David E. Felhauer, Victoria; Bishop Charles V. Grahmann, Dallas; Bishop Curtis J. Guillory, S.V.D., Beaumont; Bishop Armando X. Ochoa, El Paso; Bishop Raymundo Peña, Brownsville; Bishop Michael D. Pfeifer, O.M.I., San Angelo; Bishop Placido Rodriguez, Lubbock; Bishop James A. Tamayo, Laredo; Bishop Kevin W. Vann, Fort Worth; and Bishop John W. Yanta, Amarillo.