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**ALERT** **FEATURED** **TOP STORY**

## **COLUMN: A responsible path forward for Virginia's energy future**

**By Sara Ratcliffe**

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**E**nergy touches every aspect of our daily lives. Families in Culpeper, Greene, Madison, and Orange depend on affordable, reliable power to light their lives and warm their homes. Farmers need electricity to run equipment.

Small businesses rely on steady service to keep their doors open. As we look ahead, the question isn't whether we should modernize our energy system—it's how to do it responsibly, in a way that protects our communities, our land, and our future.

Right now, Virginia's power grid is still dominated by fossil fuels. On the hottest summer afternoons, most of our electricity comes from coal, oil, and natural gas. Nuclear provides roughly a quarter, while solar and wind make up a smaller but growing share. This is not a failure—it's the beginning of a transition. Change in the energy sector doesn't happen overnight.

The Virginia Clean Economy Act, passed in 2020, set a long-term framework to build more in-state power and reduce dependence on imported energy. The idea was simple: instead of sending billions of dollars out of state for coal and natural gas, we should invest in energy projects here at home. That way, we create jobs locally, stabilize prices, and keep more of our energy supply under Virginia's control.

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Of course, moving toward cleaner energy raises important questions. How do we ensure reliability during extreme weather? How do we protect families from rising costs? And, especially here in rural Virginia, how do we strike the right balance

between encouraging new investment and safeguarding farmland and the character of our communities?

These are not partisan questions. They are practical ones. And the answers require listening to local voices.

### **Local Input and Community Control**

Energy decisions made in Richmond or corporate boardrooms don't always reflect the needs of rural communities. That's why local governments and residents must have a strong voice in siting new projects. Clean energy can benefit our communities, but it should never be imposed without local input. Our towns, localities, and counties need to guide how new development fits into our landscapes and local economies.

### **Protecting Farmland and Rural Heritage**

For generations, farmland has been the backbone of our region—feeding families, supporting jobs, and shaping the way of life we pass down to our children. Clean energy projects must respect that heritage. Utility-scale solar and wind should prioritize rooftops, parking lots, brownfields, industrial sites, and less-productive acreage, not prime farmland that sustains us. Preserving farmland is every bit as important to our long-term security as producing electricity.

### **Balancing Energy and Agriculture**

Clean energy brings opportunity—new jobs, new tax revenue for schools and services, and a chance to strengthen local economies. But we must ensure that growth doesn't come at the expense of agriculture. A balanced approach means allowing energy projects where they make sense while ensuring farms remain viable for future generations. Both sectors can thrive side by side if we plan carefully and keep local voices at the table where decisions are made.

### **Reliability and Affordability**

Every Virginian expects the lights to come on when they flip the switch, and no family should have to choose between paying the power bill or buying groceries. As we modernize, reliability and affordability must remain at the forefront. That means:

- Conducting thorough grid assessments before older plants close, so replacement power is ready.
- Expanding energy efficiency programs that lower bills right away by reducing waste.
- Maintaining a diverse mix of energy sources—nuclear, renewables, natural gas, and storage—so no single disruption puts our grid at risk.

### **Preparing for the Future**

It's true that renewables and storage technology are still developing. But that's exactly why Virginia should lead in innovation. Every breakthrough in storage, transmission, and efficiency makes us stronger, more independent, and less vulnerable to fuel price spikes. Once solar panels or wind turbines are built, they produce stable, predictable power for decades—without the fuel costs that drive up bills.

This is not about choosing one source of energy over another. It's about creating a balanced, reliable system that draws on the best of each resource. Fossil fuels, nuclear, wind, solar, and storage all have a role to play. The goal is not ideology—it's practicality: making sure Virginia has the power we need at prices families can afford.

The Virginia Way Forward Here in our part of the Commonwealth, we know the value of stewardship. We work the land, care for our communities, and think about what we leave behind for generations to come. Energy planning should reflect those same values: respect for the land, responsibility to future generations, and common-sense balance between economic growth and preservation.

We don't need to choose between affordable bills and protecting farmland. We don't need to choose between reliable service and a cleaner future. With careful planning, strong local input, and a commitment to balance, we can have a future that works for us all.

Energy isn't a partisan fight—it's a shared responsibility. If we work together, listen to one another, and keep Virginia's long-term interests in mind, we can build an energy future that is reliable, affordable, locally guided, and respectful of the land we call home.

**That's the path forward.**

Sara Ratcliffe of Greene County is the Democratic nominee for the Virginia House of Delegates, District 62 also spanning Culpeper, Orange and Madison. Her background is in political advocacy and campaign work. Ratcliffe holds a degree in political science.