



*Building People Power for Climate & Energy Justice*

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April 20, 2018

Connie Walker  
President and General Manager  
WUNC Radio  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Subject: Continuing news media failure in coverage of Duke Energy, fracked gas and accelerating climate urgency

Dear Ms. Walker,

Thank you for replying to a number of listeners who contacted you about your March 25 story on the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. I write to respond to your message and to comment on both the ACP piece and the much broader failure of the state and national news media to scrutinize “natural” gas and power industry actions and propaganda, and the connection to climate urgency.

Let me first emphasize that I admire WUNC’s news professionals, including *The State of Things* staff, and have enjoyed a collegial and constructive relationship with many of them for more than two decades. In recent years I have many times commended them privately and publicly for doing some excellent work on climate change and sea level rise.

In short, my primary concern is that there is a compelling combination of news stories that WUNC journalists – along with dozens of other fine reporters in North Carolina and at the national level – are not being allowed to tell, despite the eagerness of many to do so:

- the fact that natural gas isn’t clean and has become a key force behind the increasingly urgent climate crisis;
- the huge expansion of the burning of gas by Duke Energy and other utilities that are doing the minimum in renewables and even stifling their growth;
- the scientific developments reflecting the startling urgency of climate change, which is being badly understated to the public;
- the availability of cheaper and superior renewable energy and storage technologies; and
- the dissemination of industry talking points about gas being clean and the “limits” of renewable alternatives, repeated over and over, often with no counter position offered.

All this boils down to some basic concepts: The actions of Duke Energy executives are aggressively making the climate crisis worse – not better; time is quickly running out for humanity to avert runaway climate and social chaos; and, as one of the world’s largest energy corporations, Duke

Energy could make a positive difference if it were held accountable for its actions and challenged to reverse course.

The work of leading scientists indicates that the odds are not at all good that humanity will turn around the climate crisis in time to avoid its worst impacts, which is doubly tragic since the technologies and economics to change course are already in place. Implementation of real solutions is being blocked by corporate control of decisions and information.

## **BACKGROUND**

From the outset, let me emphasize that NC WARN's complaint is not about a lack of "air time" for our organization. For many years we have been frequently relied upon, by WUNC and scores of other news outlets statewide and beyond, to provide comment and informed background. However, this state's media have always been reluctant to cover initiatives by credible nonprofit advocates regardless of our staff experience and expert consultants. Moreover, advocates have long had a problem getting the news media to cross "safe" lines and actually question the utilities' position on the biggest issues, particularly if the corporate business model is challenged. That problem has grown much worse since mid-2015 when Duke Energy began an enormous and prolonged expansion of fracked gas for power generation. I am convinced that, in the case of public radio, the problem lies with NPR leaders.

On a related note, I have been a guest many times on *The State of Things* and public affairs shows at other media outlets. In the mid-2000s, one of the issues I was discussing on these shows was NC WARN's contention that the US nuclear "renaissance" would likely fail while diverting precious money and time that should be spent on solid measures to decarbonize our electricity infrastructure. We now know this prediction to be correct, as Duke Energy has cancelled six planned nuclear reactors – after wasting more than a billion public dollars – and is projecting only 7% renewables by 2032. Perhaps the media's willingness to let us discuss that issue even contributed to public awareness that helped cancel those nukes. In recent years, however, none of those shows have allowed NC WARN to inform the public of a much greater threat: the power industry's huge expansion of fracked gas that is worsening the climate crisis and blocking clean energy alternatives.

The fracking industry and the utilities creating the demand for fracked gas are driving what top scientists are now calling a planetary emergency – and the news media must finally begin fostering open debate about it.

As recognized above, WUNC has done some excellent reporting on climate change and rising sea levels. Each time, NC WARN has commended you but urged you to also report on this state's role in *causing* global warming, and how this state might help slow it down. Over the years, our plea has grown more urgent as communities are increasingly being devastated and as scientists warn that humanity is very rapidly approaching a point of no return. NC WARN has pointed to the fact that Duke Energy, based in North Carolina, is one of the world's largest greenhouse gas polluters, thus its role extends far beyond state borders. Duke's huge expansion of fracked natural gas – which is ongoing and set to continue for at least 15 years – is putting in place assets that Duke will be loath to

abandon despite mounting economic and technological arguments for a cleaner path. This should be squarely at the center of the climate debate.

Despite my good relationship with WUNC News and SOT staff, nearly all efforts to foster news attention to these biggest of issues have failed, as they have with scores of other news outlets with which NC WARN has built relationships and credibility over the years. And it's not because reporters don't want to tell the story.

### **YOUR PIECE ON THE ATLANTIC COAST PIPELINE**

While we commended your reporter on some good points in the ACP piece, we were perplexed by the repeated references to the pollution and safety benefits of fracked "natural" gas. In your reply to listeners who complained to you, you cited only one of the four passages in the story that imply gas is cleaner than coal.

You also wrote, that "*We simply cannot include all aspects of [energy and environmental impacts] in each and every story.*" That would be a fair excuse except that you *did* find room to refer four times to the clean/safe benefits of gas in a seven-minute story. Surely at least once you should have offered balance by noting the all-important background point that, regarding climate impacts, "scientists argue that methane leaking and venting throughout the gas supply chain makes it disastrous for the climate." The added balance could have been as succinct as those few words, or about five seconds of broadcast time.

With your reply, you also sent links to six earlier stories as evidence that you have covered fracking and methane "*comprehensively and frequently in the past.*" However, three of those six have no relevance to the "gas is clean" issue at all, and three of the six are not even WUNC stories (two are from PRI's *The World* and one is an online-only blog post from national NPR). The two WUNC stories in your list that are relevant to our complaint are from May 2017 and are essentially the same story: a three-minute news spot revisited in a brief discussion on *The State of Things*.

You failed to list the 10-minute *State of Things* interview with Cornell's Dr. Robert Howarth, a respected expert on the climate risks of methane emissions from the gas industry, when he was in town for NC WARN's forum "[Fracking Gas, Duke Energy, and Climate Crisis](#)" in March 2016.

I commended your reporters, editors and the SOT host for the March 2016 and May 2017 pieces and encouraged them to expand on the issue, particularly because they had not covered some important facts, such as that Duke Energy plans to build some 20 gas-fired power plants in the Carolinas over 15 years. I also urged them to include the methane-climate impact as essential background in any upcoming stories relating to this state's energy situation, such as the Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

Instead, we continue to hear stories referring to gas as cleaner than coal – the industry line –without any counterpoint. I and other NC WARN staffers have repeatedly been in contact with several WUNC and NPR reporters and editors regarding their persistent repetition of the gas-utility line about "clean-burning gas" and failure to mention methane emissions, and we have urged them to cover the climate impact of so many US utilities racing to burn more fracked gas.

Just one example: Only days after your ACP story, on March 30<sup>th</sup>, NPR's Christopher Joyce, in a 40-second top-of-hour news spot, referred to global carbon dioxide emissions being down over the past decade largely because of coal being replaced by natural gas and renewables. He correctly called CO<sub>2</sub> the primary greenhouse gas. It would seem appropriate – indeed imperative – to also mention that emissions of the *second* most prominent greenhouse gas – methane, which is responsible for 40 percent of current global warming since it is so much more potent at trapping heat than CO<sub>2</sub> – have been way up during that period due largely to the US fracking boom. As we have observed, though, NPR seems unwilling to seriously cover either methane or climate urgency.

Thus, as I have detailed to your news and SOT leaders in the past, to say that WUNC has covered either methane or fracking's climate impacts “comprehensively and frequently,” as your reply did, is demonstrably incorrect.

We do not complain that you have never reported on the climate risk of natural gas. We complain rather that – having covered that risk once or twice – you then later revert to repeatedly implying that gas is a step in the right direction on climate change, when you should know from your previous reporting that the opposite is the case.

#### **UNDERREPORTING OF CLIMATE URGENCY AND HOPEFUL NEWS**

A [United Nations science panel](#), Dr. Michael Mann and others warn that dramatic reductions in greenhouse emission absolutely must begin by 2020, and research by [NASA](#) and others shows that methane emissions from the fracking supply chain have grown rapidly and are a leading driver of the climate crisis. [Dr. James Hansen's 2017 study](#) shows that climate pollution to date already ensures we will pass the 1.5°C target of the Paris agreement (we were at 1.17C at the end of 2017) and that avoiding runaway climate chaos will require extraordinary steps that might not be achievable. One of those steps – which *is* achievable – is to curtail methane escaping unburned into the air from the gas-to-power industries.

It's no wonder that Bill McKibben, the nation's most prominent climate activist, recently noted regarding the climate crisis that shifting from coal to gas is akin to kicking OxyContin by taking up heroin. He cited the news media's and environmentalists' failure to convey methane's importance as the biggest tragedy of the effort to slow climate change.

That's because methane, or “natural” gas, is 80 to 100 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub> at trapping heat, so the unburned gas leaking and venting throughout the natural gas supply chain simply must be curbed starting right now. The findings noted above support many earlier studies, and bolster the argument that a huge rise in super-potent methane emissions is linked to soaring global temperatures in recent years.

The sharp increase in methane emissions also correlates closely with the US fracking boom, and is further evidence that the utilities' massive expansion of fracked natural gas pipelines and power plants is driving humanity toward the cliff of climate chaos. All this adds to the urgency of openly and fully addressing the climate implications of the great expansion of fracked natural gas power plants and pipelines by Duke Energy and other US utilities.

But virtually none of this is being reported to the American public or included in the spotty debate over the climate crisis.

Perhaps most tragic is that, as [Cornell's Howarth](#) emphasizes, cutting methane emissions can *immediately* help slow global warming, compared to the decades-long impact of cutting carbon dioxide. In fact, stanching methane emissions in the short term is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid passing the point at which warming continues under its own momentum regardless of human activity.

Also, methane emissions from the gas industry are largely avoidable – on the cheap. Even though fracking should be banned for many additional reasons, there is zero chance of that happening within the narrowing window to avert runaway chaos. The media should be reporting that solid work by Environmental Defense Fund and others shows that curbing methane emissions is both feasible and cost-effective. Amazingly, Duke Energy leaders are opposed to regulations requiring such reduction. WUNC's Jason deBruyn put Duke on record to that effect in the May 2017 story, which makes it even more troubling that WUNC has never touched the issue since then.

### **UNREPORTED OR MOSTLY IGNORED**

In 2015, Dr. Harvard Ayers and I cautioned Duke Energy CEO Lynn Good that making a huge expansion of gas would be to gamble that the public doesn't find out that it's even worse for the climate than coal. Sadly, so far her gamble is paying off. In addition to the "gas is clean" myth, other key issues that NC WARN has publicized but seen little or no media coverage of include:

1. Duke Energy's claim to have cut greenhouse emissions by more than 20 percent since 2006 – by pretending only CO2 counts while ignoring unburned methane emissions: *Virtually all related news articles repeat the Duke line.*
2. Duke Energy's 15-year plan to build the equivalent of 20 large, gas-fired plants in the Carolinas: *Virtually no coverage by any news reporters.*
3. Duke Energy's actual renewables commitment – about 2% of overall generation in the Carolinas per latest documentation, with plans to raise it to only to 7% over 15 years: *Almost no coverage by news reporters (one recent exception by WUNC in a brief piece, and another by WRAL).*
4. Explanation of US fracking as a leading driver of climate crisis due to unburned methane leaks and venting: *Virtually no coverage by news reporters (brief exceptions by WUNC noted above).*
5. The urgency of climate change, even as leading scientists and a United Nations panel say greenhouse gas emissions must peak by 2020: *Virtually ignored by NC news reporting, with the national narrative leading people to believe humanity has decades to change.*
6. For many years past and future, Duke Energy maintains reserve generation capacity far in excess of requirements, yet compliant state regulators keep allowing the utility to build more plants and raising rates: *Virtually ignored by NC news reporting.*
7. Curbing methane emissions from the gas supply is essential to slowing climate change and can be done cost-effectively: *Virtually no coverage by any news reporters.*

8. Availability of a cheaper path using renewables and energy storage that could quickly replace statewide fossil fuel electricity and benefit all customers: *Only the Winston-Salem Chronicle has reported on this.*

Except for the first point above, there's been very little to no reporting on these issues. So Duke Energy essentially never even gets questioned about them. A few editorial pages have allowed us to explain points in the list above, but subsequent news reports continue to ignore the counter-narrative to the utility position almost completely.

Those last two items represent the good-news stories of our time: two feasible ways to quickly help slow global warming. The combination of on-site solar power, battery storage and energy-balancing programs are proven technologies that are already replacing new gas-fired power plants in other states. NC WARN's consulting engineer, Bill Powers, has crafted a comprehensive strategy for using that combination to replace coal and gas in this state. Duke Energy executives fear the plan, *NC Clean Path 2025*, so much that they persuaded the Utilities Commission not to consider it, even though NC WARN has been a prominent player in the regulatory and legal arena for many years.

Corporate suppression of regulatory debate about such an encouraging breakthrough is exactly the kind of story most journalists would love to tell. Why aren't they being allowed to?

Sadly, the news media have joined government regulators in actually shielding Duke Energy executives and other corporate polluters from ever having to debate their critics on the biggest issues. This is particularly frustrating after NC WARN, our experts and others have constantly gained ground in understanding and exposing thorny issues over the years.

I always encourage reporters to scrutinize our work and accuracy; we're eager to engage in rigorous debate on these issues. Why should Duke Energy keep getting a free pass on its actions and propaganda?

### **WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?**

I have spent a lot of time wondering why this massive media failure is occurring. I know that NPR listeners have demanded an accounting of whether years of copious gas industry underwriting is behind it (the NPR ombudsman has addressed this issue on at least two occasions). I would like to believe that the firewall between US media advertising and news departments is more robust than that. Yet the same question has occurred to me when I hear Duke Energy's underwriting on WUNC. Again, I have strong confidence in the journalistic integrity of the news and SOT people I've worked with, but I know how top-down pressure can hamper and frustrate good journalists within and outside public radio. That problem has worsened on many fronts as corporate influence over our society continues to grow.

Duke's WUNC underwriting since mid-2017 touts the corporation's smarter and cleaner energy future. Yet, as we have informed you again and again, Duke's actual plan for the Carolinas calls for 8,500 megawatts of new gas plants and only the bare minimum in renewables and efficiency, about 7 and 3 percent, respectively. And Duke's proposed \$13 billion "grid modernization" is considered a needless boondoggle by big business and environmental advocates.

If an advertiser prominently promotes a claim that is vigorously disputed by knowledgeable and respected critics, isn't it incumbent on the media outlet's news division to scrutinize the claim, at the very least? And isn't scrutiny particularly warranted given Duke Energy's recent track record on costly coal ash and nuclear licensing failures?

The cause of the media failure, in my opinion, runs much deeper than ad dollars.

While the natural tendency is to blame the Trump administration for climate failure – not an unfair critique – increasingly, scientists and advocacy groups across the US are [sharing information](#) about the national pressure on the news media to suppress the gas-power-climate issue. Some are identifying the Democratic Party's connections to and promotion of the gas and power industries. This is impacting most of the independent media and some of the Big Green nonprofits too. Some behemoth corporations have made gas the “backbone” of their business plans – as stated by Duke CEO Lynn Good – so the stakes, and money invested, are virtually immeasurable in maintaining the myth that gas provides clean, cheap “energy security.”

Regardless of the reasons, I invite rigorous analysis of my complaint. One thing is clear: Nearly all US media outlets have chosen not to delve into the connected issues of electric utilities' huge fracked gas expansion, methane-driven climate urgency, and an alternative, cheaper, ready-to-go clean energy path.

Meanwhile, it seems truly pathetic that nonprofits such as ours must raise money for paid advertising to directly inform the public about core issues involving our economic and physical survival, as NC WARN has done in recent years. Our advertising is obviously no substitute for the level of news attention required in a democratic society.

### **HOPING FOR A BETTER DAY**

I deeply regret having to write this letter, but it is clear to me that humanity is facing the final stretch of the race to avoid out-of-control climate disruption, and the media's failure to tell the public even the basic facts is both indefensible and tragic. I am determined not to look back someday and wish I had been more assertive in speaking my mind, and I urge every person in the news industry to avoid that situation too.

Again, I don't fault the reporters. I know that many of them are frustrated by the direct or subtle suppression of their instincts to expose malign corporate practices and other big stories. I have always enjoyed working with fine journalists – but the urgency of breaking through the US media block requires news reporters, opinion writers and media bosses to choose which side of the climate fight they are on.

Our entire society desperately needs to break the shackles of the corporate influence that is destroying our wellbeing on so many fronts. Climate chaos, as the biggest threat to humanity, is not a “grandchildren” problem. It is devastating wildlife and people – disproportionately communities of color least responsible for creating the problem – right now, even as abrupt, cascading and cataclysmic changes are within sight. The pervasive deference to Duke Energy must end now.

There's still a narrow window of time to make dramatic corrections, but as Dr. Hansen points out, we have already missed our best chances to do so. Each of us owes it to ourselves and to others to continue finding ways to tackle the toughest issues in a way befitting an advanced society, and to rise to this most urgent call.

Finally, I am always eager to reconcile differences. But I've sought meetings with WUNC news leaders several times in the past year, to no avail. I intend to make this letter public in keeping with NC WARN's emphasis on transparency and open debate – the polar opposite of Duke Energy's efforts to suppress and distort the issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Warren". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jim Warren  
Executive Director

cc: Naomi Klein  
Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II  
Bill McKibben  
Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting  
PR Watch/Center for Media and Democracy  
Public Citizen  
NPR