



**BUILDING PEOPLE POWER
FOR ENERGY & CLIMATE JUSTICE**

August 28, 2019

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

Subject: The urgent need for truth about North Carolina's pivotal role in the climate crisis

Dear Ms. Walker,

With all but a few national and North Carolina news outlets still failing to cover several key aspects of the accelerating climate crisis and the very hopeful clean energy revolution, we again urge you to allow WUNC's journalists to convey North Carolina's potentially pivotal role in averting runaway climate, social and economic chaos.

Our continuing complaint with WUNC decision-makers boils down to this:

- You allow Duke Energy to make deceptive claims on key climate and energy issues in its on-air underwriting (advertising) spots, which have been abundant for years but seem to have increased during this year's unprecedented legislative fight over a bill written by Duke Energy.
- You don't allow your journalists to report on issues relating to Duke's advertising claims – much less scrutinize the claims directly.
- You refuse to report on practical ways that North Carolinians and our monopoly utilities might help avert climate chaos.

Since Duke Energy began aggressively expanding its use of fracked "natural" gas in 2015, NC WARN has frequently provided well-sourced and accurate information to state media outlets, particularly WUNC, on the fact that fracked gas makes global warming worse – not better – and on hopeful advances in clean energy. For 31 years we've been a credible source for state and national media. Our information is based on science and official documents, and often contradicts the deceptive corporate propaganda from Duke Energy and other fossil fuel interests.

Even since early 2018, when we openly [urged](#) you – [twice](#) – to accurately cover these issues, the climate crisis has grown worse. Millions of people, including North Carolinians, are being

harmful, yet there's little news attention to Duke Energy greatly expanding its use of fracked gas, or to clean-energy advances that are cheaper than grid power and that [could quickly replace](#) fossil-fueled power generation. [Forbes Magazine](#) recently highlighted Duke Energy as fighting against the shift away from fossil fuels even as many other U.S. utilities are moving to cheaper renewables-with-storage.

Meanwhile, Duke Energy executives keep spending [millions annually](#) to broadcast their various deceptions on WUNC and elsewhere, including their Orwellian slogan about “building a Smarter Energy Future.” The fact that the Charlotte-based corporation uses customer dollars for incessant advertising on WUNC only increases your journalistic and ethical obligation to help listeners scrutinize the claims. Your failure to do so is enabling Duke Energy to seriously mislead the public – exactly opposite of the mission of professional news outlets.

Of course, “Smarter Energy Future” is subjective, and we have frequently urged WUNC to have your journalists examine the slogan for listeners, to no avail. But here are a few key aspects of Duke Energy's *actual* 15-year Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) for the Carolinas, the latest one filed and recently approved by the N.C. Utilities Commission – but virtually untouched by the news media:

- Adding 9,600 MW of generation from fracked natural gas by 2033– the equivalent of 24 large power plants. Prominent scientists say gas is even [worse for the climate than coal](#), while industry experts warn that new gas plants built now will become “[junk assets](#)” and that the fracking boom has been “an [unmitigated disaster](#) [with] bankruptcies involving nearly a hundred billion dollars of debt [that] has long-term implications for the end users of natural gas.”
- Adding only 230 megawatts (MW) of battery storage, even as many states and utilities are projecting [10 times as much](#) since battery storage is the perfect complement to renewables (storing power for use after the sun sets or the wind dies down) and as renewables-with-storage are quickly replacing natural gas generation.
- Becoming only 8% renewable by 2033, while many U.S. utilities already exceed 30%. For years, Duke Energy has successfully misled the public with its green-washing propaganda and by suppressing scrutiny by the news media.

How many WUNC listeners would consider such a plan a “smarter energy future” in an age of an accelerating climate crisis? Obviously, these facts are profoundly important, and Duke Energy's advertising language on WUNC is obscuring them. Examples include:

- 1) The claim that Duke is “committed to 50% carbon-free generation in the Carolinas.” Many listeners might hear this as “renewable.” In fact, 52% of Duke Energy’s generation is already from nuclear power. As noted above, Duke plans to be only 8% renewable by 2033, with 40% of its power from fossil fuels at that time. (See p. 69, Fig. 12-F, [Duke’s IRP](#).)
- 2) A Duke Energy boast that the company will increase its renewable power production in North Carolina by 100% in the next five years. On the other side of your journalistic firewall, your news department should explain that this increase is to a mere 8%.
- 3) “Reducing carbon emissions 36% in the Carolinas since 2005 and committed to continue lowering emissions and increasing renewable energy.” If this emission reduction is true, it refers only to carbon dioxide. It pretends that methane – also a carbon compound and a greenhouse gas 100 times more potent than CO₂ in the utterly critical near-term – isn’t being released unburned at climate-wrecking levels throughout the natural gas system. A [brand new study](#) adds to the evidence that fracking is responsible for most of the recent increase in atmospheric methane concentrations and that reducing emissions from gas infrastructure – from wellhead to power plant – is the “low-hanging fruit” to help slow climate change. Yet WUNC and NPR listeners keep hearing the utility PR about “cleaner-burning natural gas,” when in fact the CO₂-reduction benefits of switching from coal to gas are more than offset by the methane emissions.

An argument could be made that the Duke Energy advertising you are running is in violation of Federal Communications Commission standards for public broadcasting. We believe that the prohibition on “qualitative” language should certainly preclude Duke Energy’s claim that the future it offers is “smarter,” even under the [relaxed rules](#) introduced by the FCC in 1984.

Obviously, there is a profound disconnect between Duke Energy’s official plans and its persistent propaganda campaign. Few state news consumers have ever been exposed to the basic facts except through the occasional editorial page article. Although you have occasionally covered Duke’s Atlantic Coast fracked gas Pipeline, WUNC has never put the ACP into the context of Duke’s huge expansion of fracked gas. Nor have you clarified the reality that Duke Energy is building only a relatively small amount of its own renewables while working to impede private sector renewables and the [addition of energy storage to existing solar farms](#).

Both NPR and WUNC have occasionally done good stories on climate change and superstorms such as Hurricane Florence. But despite NC WARN’s urging for many years, neither WUNC nor other media – with few exceptions – have ever delved into how this state must help slow climate change by rejecting the expansion of natural gas before the crisis spins past humanity’s control. Obviously and tragically, a key reason for that failure is the clout of Duke Energy, one of the

world's largest climate polluters, probably WUNC's largest advertiser, and a major influencer of state government, as reaffirmed by a stunning [recent report](#) that you also declined to cover.

Sometimes the problem goes beyond omission to actual error. In April, you refused to correct a [story's](#) gross misstatement claiming Senate Bill 559 would save Duke Energy's customers 15-20% on their power bills. That statement exceeded even Duke Energy's claims by a factor of ten, and came as a [highly credible industrial group](#) calculated that the bill could actually cause residential rates to rise by 50% or more. It's also troubling that, other than that flawed story, WUNC has virtually ignored SB 559 even though it is the most significant and controversial legislation Duke Energy has attempted in at least 12 years. Meanwhile, Duke's advertising on WUNC expanded beginning in May – the very time when Duke and its political cronies ran into a solid wall of opposition that has stalled SB 559 ever since.

One more example: In June, NPR did a [piece on Duke Energy](#) that had some good points, but excluded any mention of methane and battery storage – despite my having emphasized these as two crucial elements in the climate-energy debate during two in-depth interviews with the reporter. National and WUNC listeners were left with the erroneous takeaway that Duke executives want to do more renewable energy but the technology just isn't available. [NC Attorney General Josh Stein](#) is among those saying battery storage is that very technology, but WUNC listeners have never heard that.

Now the climate crisis continues to accelerate and there is very little time to avert the threshold toward runaway social chaos. U.N. scientists [warned last fall](#) that global emissions must be halved by 2030, and many say emissions *must start coming downward* [within a year or two](#) in order to avoid crossing that threshold. Prominent scientists say that [curbing methane emissions](#) from natural gas infrastructure is vital if humanity is to avert such a disastrous tipping point.

In my opinion, the failure of the U.S. media is a key factor in humanity's failure to deal with the climate crisis. If this pattern continues, nearly every manager in the news business carries responsibility for the consequences. Duke Energy has perpetrated an ongoing deception against the people of North Carolina, and news bosses such as you must make it stop.

We desperately need media outlets to step up and inform the public of the very real solutions that exist and the obstacles to their implementation. WUNC keeps the public well informed on many issues, but the same standards are not upheld when Duke Energy is involved. We know your talented journalists want to cover these issues and we urge you to make this a top priority of your

news department. Our concerns are doubly important because WUNC reporting and Duke's ads are broadcast well beyond the Triangle through your transmitters around the state.

To be clear, we are not seeking favorable coverage, just the straight-up, balanced journalism on which the station prides itself and which WUNC supporters expect. As ever, we stand ready to help you with solid information resources and referrals to technical experts.

Because this is a matter of extreme urgency, and because we have pointed it out to you repeatedly, to no avail, we will continue monitoring your coverage and your advertising. However, I sincerely hope that you will take immediate action to improve WUNC's climate and energy coverage and your adherence to your underwriting standards.

As always, I would be happy to discuss this matter and I look forward to your timely reply.

Sincerely,

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

Jim Warren
Executive Director