

Linda Engle Introduction: Sustainable Idaho is brought to you by the Portneuf Resource Council.

Madison Long: Welcome to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host Madison Long and today I talked with Aaron Menenberg, the Idaho Policy Manager at Renewable Northwest. Renewable Northwest is an advocacy organization focused on supporting a regional grid that meets growing demand with reliable, affordable, and increasingly clean energy. With a Masters of Science in Energy Management, Menenberg has led state and national political and legislative initiatives to advance a variety of domestic and international policies.

On October 22, 2025, Menenberg gave a speech in Pocatello discussing the future of energy in Idaho after taking an interest in the Bannock County Renewable Energy Ordinance. As a reminder, the Ordinance is in response to the 2023 ban on renewable energy which prohibited private landowners' ability to place medium and large solar projects on their land. The ban does not prevent residential homes from installing solar, however.

Aaron Menenberg: Primarily, I just come back to the main point of my job: keeping the state open for energy development. Idaho is 1 of the 10 fastest growing in the country. We have incredible energy demand and we need to be building a lot more. So, when you have a place like Bannock County that currently doesn't allow any renewable energy development, it's a place that we want to focus our time because our utilities need options in terms of what they can build.

ML: Menenberg shared that just this year, Renewable Northwest has helped take action in Lincoln, Ada, Jerome, and Pierce counties, helping them adopt ordinances that allow for renewable energy to compete.

What kinds of factors are increasing this high demand for energy?

AM: Where there's people, there's more need for more electricity. Idaho is diversifying. The whole country is looking at reshoring manufacturing, which includes the energy industry too, looking to make more of our products in the country. And sustaining that economic growth, that job growth, all of that requires more electricity. The electrification, getting away from fossil fuels and fueling our cars with electricity, making sure our buildings are being run more off of electricity than natural gas. The digital space is growing rapidly. Artificial intelligence, cloud computing, crypto, all that just drives more demand. And then our climate and weather are changing. Hotter highs, colder lows, unseasonable weather, all this increases stress on the grid in ways that it wasn't necessarily designed to accommodate.

ML: So why should people try to adopt more renewable resources like solar and wind compared to more traditional resources like nuclear or coal?

AM: As Renewable Northwest, we're supportive of an all-of-the-above approach and that is largely for practical reasons. This demand growth really is incredible, and it's not like any one type of energy can fill all of that demand. So we're not actively against anything, but we do promote renewables because utilities, which are responsible for our grid, look for electricity

that's reliable, affordable, clean. And as we've been talking about this demand, timeliness is super critical.

The only energy sources that meet all of those needs that we in Idaho and across the country have, are wind, solar, and battery storage. Over 90% of all new energy generation across the country in 2025 has been from wind, solar, and storage.

ML: Menenberg went on to explain that based on factors like whether or not a community allows for certain energy generation methods, figuring out where they should go, purchasing equipment, and the actual building process, at a minimum renewables take around 2-3 years. Comparatively, traditional nuclear power takes roughly 10 to 20 years, with natural gas somewhere between the two.

Now, each of the different power generating methods has its risks, from nuclear meltdowns to fire hazards from solar energy. Could you discuss the safety concerns and track records of the different types of generation?

AM: No matter what we're talking about, turning something from what it is into electricity forces us all to reckon with the reality that energy is dangerous. And since electricity is the blood of our world, it's what runs through our world's veins to keep us going, we do need to accept that that risk is always going to be there.

That said, it kinda boils down to one question, what's the fuel source? If it's a renewable fuel source, wind or solar, the safety profile risk is a lot lower than if that fuel is fossil-based, which is combustible and produces harmful emissions. The other really important point here for people to consider is, with renewables where that combustion component doesn't exist, a lot of the safety issues we have come from human error. We are, as humans, usually much more at fault when something goes wrong than the actual generation itself.

ML: A lot of farmers and ranchers are concerned about this renewable energy ban. How do you think this ordinance will affect property rights for them?

AM: Well, frankly, it enshrines the right to use their land as they see fit. It is interesting, there's this perceived tension between the energy industry and the agriculture industry. What I hear at a county meeting is if we allow solar, it's going to take over all of our farmland. I just want to put things in context right now. Solar energy uses 0.001% of Idaho's state land today. If we were to build enough solar to power all of Idaho, just on state land, that number would jump to two or maybe three percent. Yes, an individual solar farm looks and is big, it is tens or hundreds of acres. But Idaho is a very large state, we have lots of agricultural land and we don't need more than a small, small fraction of it for solar and wind.

In a lot of ways, Renewable Northwest, we help support the industry because we're dual use. It allows farmers who are struggling to keep their land, keep it in the family, get some supportive

income. And on the property rights side, an ordinance like this just enshrines their right to do what's best for their families and for their land.

ML: Going back to the energy ordinance, what are some of the benefits of this ordinance for our local government, renewable energy developers, and community members?

AM: I think one thing that a lot of people aren't aware of is that if you're in a county where there's renewable energy generation, you get property tax relief and depending on how that energy is getting generated, your county may also see increases to their budget. In Idaho, we tax the energy plants, the wind farms, the solar farms. That money goes to local taxing authorities, used to offset property taxes. It's really up to the community's discretion to determine how that money gets spent.

Then there's the payments that the landowners get themselves and how they might use that money. I've heard stories of farmers in Idaho who don't have farmable land, leasing it for solar or wind, and then using that revenue to lease or buy farmable land and then putting their farming operations over there. So, they've used it as a way to expand their business. And none of it ever happens because it's forced. It's because the communities decide that they're okay with it or that they want it.

ML: If this ordinance is adopted, what might Bannock County's energy generation look like five years down the road?

AM: Down the road, it likely means Bannock is contributing to supporting Idaho's energy needs, including its own, and it's starting to get some of those benefits. It takes years to build these things, so not everything's going to roll in in the first five years in terms of steel in the ground, electrons on the grid, property taxes going down. That's what it looks like 10 years from now. But without doing this now, you can't have that stuff in 10 years. Bannock is a good place for wind and solar.

The way the system works, our utilities are required by our Public Utility Commission to bring the lowest cost energy resources onto the grid. And they can only bring those resources onto the grid that are resources that are allowed by counties like Bannock. So if Bannock or other counties say we're not going to allow renewable energy in our county, we all need to understand that our rates are going to go up even more than they would otherwise. Bannock's citizens, its voters, whether or not they choose to indicate support or opposition to the ordinance in Bannock, need to recognize that if we say no to renewables, we're saying yes to higher electricity rates. We and our commissioners are directly responsible for that part of how rates get set. We need to not blame other people for it.

ML Outro: Thank you to Aaron Menenberg, the Idaho Policy Manager at Renewable Northwest for sharing more about how the new Bannock County Ordinance would help owners to regain their private property rights, allowing them a source of income that helps keep their property

viable. For more information on Renewable Northwest and their mission, go to renewablenw.org.

If you'd like to know more about the Bannock County Renewable Energy Ordinance, the Bannock County Planning and Development council will be holding a hearing on November 19 at 5:15 at the Bannock County Court house.

L Outro: Funding for our Sustainable Idaho Student Hosts is provided in part by this radio station, the ISU Center for Ecological Research and Education, and the Sagebrush Steppe Landtrust through the ISU Career Path Internship Program. Direction, funding, and additional support is provided by the Portneuf Resource Council.