

Utah can lead by moving away from fossil fuels, Editorial Board writes

If we had any real political leadership, Utah could show the world how it's done.



"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

— [Proverbs 29:18](#)

Just as it was difficult for those in the Salt Lake Valley to see their beautiful mountains early last week, Utah's political

leadership continues to show that its vision of our future is seriously impaired.

[Smoke](#) from [massive wildfires in California and Oregon](#) endangered the health of people in Utah and even further east, leaving us with scratchy throats, dry eyes and eerie sunsets. It's not that such low visibility is all that unusual around here. It's just that, this time, it had little to do with our own auto and refinery emissions or our cold-weather atmospheric inversions.

But it is all part of one big picture, one that is at once hazy and crystal clear.

Climate change is real. It is not just something that may someday melt the polar ice caps. It is causing extreme weather events and cataclysmic wild fires from California to Greece to Siberia. And we need to turn our attention, as nations and as individuals, to what we can do about it.

But just as the United Nations' [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) released its latest — and most frightening — report on the reality of and the potential devastation from the damage we have done to our planet, [a group of counties in Utah](#) was seriously proposing a really bad idea called the [Uinta Basin Railway](#).

Unable to think about our future in any way other than to make

it look like our past, Utah's political class, [from the governor on down](#), is determined to squeeze the last drop of a particularly problematic kind of hydrocarbon known as waxy crude out of the ground, ship it to refineries and further pollute the atmosphere at every step along the way.

Because current free-market conditions make all that only marginally profitable, an outfit called the [Seven County Infrastructure Coalition](#) wants to use public money to plan and build a railway that would disturb streams and wildlife habitat, allowing as many as 11 trains a day, with maybe 100 cars each, to move the crude to refineries as far away as the Gulf of Mexico, in hopes of boosting demand and prices.

The first problem with that idea is that it would use money from a federal fund that takes some of the royalties from fossil fuel production and is supposed to be used to help clean up the mess local governments are left with when mining and drilling is part of the landscape. The rail plan would not clean up any mess. It would just make it worse.

What Utah and all of its political subdivisions should be doing with that fund, and a lot more money besides, is actively moving us away from fossil fuels, both as a source of revenue and as a means of powering our economy, and toward the kinds of renewable energy that we potentially have in abundance.

Utah needs new leadership, the kind that will face the facts. Facts that are both grim and hopeful, and push, pull and drag us to the future we deserve. A future powered by renewable solar, wind, geothermal and other clean and renewable sources of power that we can not only use ourselves but sell to power-hungry yet pollution-averse markets in California and Oregon.

The latest IPCC report, labeled "[code red for humanity](#)," declares a great deal of damage has already been locked in. Sea levels are going to continue to rise. Extreme weather events are inevitable. Drought, wildfires and heat waves are going to be the new normal. But [it is not too late](#) to at least mitigate the disasters, if only we will see the facts as they are and move from fossil fuels to the many other forms of energy that we know how to produce.

Our state's motto is "Industry." That doesn't just mean smokestacks and gears. It means innovation and creativity and looking at old problems in new ways. There's a lot of that in our history, though we seem to have forgotten it.

Somewhere in our state are the people who will apply that spirit to this greatest threat in the history of our civilization. It is time for them to stand up, be heard, start businesses, run for office and move Utah from being part of the problem to part of the solution.