



<http://newamericamedia.org/2013/12/qa-miya-yoshitani-on-clean-energy-economic-justice.php#>

Q&A: Miya Yoshitani On California's Clean Energy Future



New America Media, Question & Answer, Ngoc Nguyen, Posted: Dec 31, 2013

Editor's Note: With the year drawing to a close, New America Media environment editor Ngoc Nguyen spoke with Miya Yoshitani, the newly appointed executive director of [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#) (APEN), about what 2014 holds for the Golden State in regards to energy.

New America Media: How does it feel to take the helm of one of the leading statewide environmental advocacy organizations in California?

Miya Yoshitani: I'm both incredibly excited and honored. I've been a part of APEN since its beginning, and was involved in the first discussions about the need for a strong organization that is doing social justice-based community organizing in low-income API [Asian and Pacific Islander] and refugee communities. There's no one else [doing this work]. There was a gap then and there still is.

NAM: What lessons have you learned from mobilizing low-income communities of color on environmental issues?

MY: One is that the organizing and leadership must come from within the communities, particularly where language and culture are such a big component of the identity of the community. The other thing is that leadership is so desperately needed in the low-income API community; and that the movement we are trying to build is not going to succeed without leadership from the people most impacted by the issues.

There is nothing like a person directly impacted by an issue being able to speak directly to a decision maker about how they are being impacted, and the solutions they have. [Ultimately,] we want the decision makers to be us. We don't want to be on the sideline of the democratic process, but be central to it.

NAM: What key environmental issues will you be tracking in 2014?

MY: The big picture is an economic transition for the whole state. At its core is the transition away from dirty energy -- fossil fuels -- to clean, renewable energy and other forms of economic development that are based [on] local means and [that are] supporting and building healthy communities; a just transition away from dirty energy, to local clean energy and local economies. [That involves] providing a just transition for the workers who are part of the dirty [fuel] industry and the communities who have been in the last century so deeply impacted by dirty energy.

NAM: There was a major surge in U.S. energy production in 2013, driven in part by fracking technology that is boosting domestic supplies of oil and natural gas. Natural gas as a transition fuel is very much a part of the national energy picture, isn't it?

MY: We (APEN) would term natural gas a false solution to the energy crisis. These transition fuels... are just as dirty. In Southern California, where the [closure of the San Onofre nuclear power plant](#) is happening, the CPUC (California Public Utilities Commission) and the California Energy Commission are discussing, and state legislators are debating, how we will replace that energy source with something else. Right now, what they are talking about is natural gas power plants. The rest of the country is making a transition away from coal.

California doesn't have coal. Our dirtiest [energy sources] are natural gas power plants. [The other trend is,] renewable energy is growing. Solar energy is growing at a faster rate than any energy out there. California needs to be a leader in the transition away from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

In 2014, the work we see ahead is tied to state energy policy. It's the opportunity cost of not going with energy choices that can build local economies: There is an incredible window of opportunity open to us right now to invest in a clean energy future for low-income communities where there is a local source of income and energy [that is] driven by needs of community and decided by local community interests and democracies.

NAM: So you think a future with 100 percent renewable energy is possible?

MY: One hundred percent renewable [energy] is possible. The technology [is developing] faster than people's understanding and trust in the technology. Storage technology and renewable technology are both growing exponentially, and it's getting cheaper at an exponential rate. When will we get there? What will we be doing in between? California will get to 100 percent renewable [energy], I have no question about that.

[There are] real questions about the timing and the incremental shifts that need to be made, and decisions about whether individual power plants close or stay open or whether you build a centralized solar plant or big wind farm... all questions we can deal with as the transition is happening. The new energy system is being built. Those questions should address the interests of the community most impacted. We can't have those interests driven by the need for more profit by energy companies.

NAM: California is on a path to get a third of its electricity from renewable sources by 2020 – is it enough given the urgency to address climate change?

MY: There is urgency... because of the perceived global agreements [being] stymied by the most powerful governments, including the U.S. I don't have much hope on federal climate change [legislation] in the near future. It's even more important for California to lead the way in responsible energy policy, driven by real needs. Local, municipal, regional and statewide -- all of those levels have a lot of promise for California.

We will meet our goal [in California] of 33 percent renewable energy by 2020. What we're looking at

now [is]: how can we maintain that pace and increase that pace looking down the road to 2050?

There's the urgency of climate change, but there's also the urgency of relieving low-income communities bearing the burden of the pollution in the state. To make the energy system work, the way it does now, there are always people living with the local impacts of that (dirty energy). The opposite of that is local communities being able to benefit from the energy they produce -- both from clean air and from economic activities.

NAM: Energy is only one piece if it. Water is critical in the state – we're in the third year of a severe drought. What water issues are on your radar?

MY: Water is huge. Climate change is manifesting [itself] in the state. You can see how vulnerable we are ...in water use and [our] long-term water future. We have to protect long-term access to water for the right reasons. Water has historically been mismanaged in the state. One of the issues most important to water access and the healthy state of water is fracking. That's bringing us to the key issue of 2014 -- California's expected growth in fracking -- that's all oil fracking, as opposed to other parts of country, where fracking is for natural gas.

The communities we work with across the state are completely panicked about the damage fracking could do to California's water supply. You have to have a water source in order to do fracking. Some fracking in L.A. [is being done with] Hydrochloric acid, without water. Most fracking in the state will use huge amounts of water, and then allow that contaminated water to go back into the water supply.

There needs to be much, much more attention [given] to the health impacts of fracking, and on the water supply. They shouldn't be doing it right now. There should be a moratorium. SB 4 makes some small incremental changes.

Given California's position of [environmental] leadership... it's a complete reversal of the path California has been on, for the past two decades. It's not living up to the purported economic benefits (*Editor: a [Physicians for Social Responsibility study](#) explored the health issues related to fracking*), let alone the environmental and community impacts. In L.A., it's happening in people's backyards. It's happening in rural and urban communities.

NAM: What was your path to becoming an environmental organizer?

MY: [Mine was] a civil rights and racial justice pathway. I think that's important to say; that's what led me to work on environmental justice issues -- campus organizing, student and youth organizing, is how I got engaged. I saw connections between racial justice and economic justice and environmental issues. That's where environmental justice lives, at that intersection.

I am less of a conservationist. I love the outdoors, mountains, camping, [being] outside. My interest in organizing around environmental justice issues is about being able to get at what are the critical root causes of the poisoning of our communities and economic dismantling of low-income communities. Fundamentally, community organizing is about building power; it's about the people most impacted having a voice.