

Feeding the Beast That Will Eat Us

The Import That Isn't

Myths and misunderstandings of Idaho's "net importer" status, and why the most repeated statistic in Idaho energy policy tells you less than everyone thinks.

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FEEDING THE BEAST

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Myths and misunderstandings of Idaho's "net importer" status, and why the most repeated statistic in Idaho energy policy tells you less than everyone thinks.

There is one statistic that shows up in nearly every Idaho energy debate, wielded by every side: Idaho imports about a third of its electricity. It appears in wind farm applications and in the arguments against them. It appears in data center pitches, in transmission line dockets, in legislative testimony, and in newspaper explainers. It is technically true. The U.S. Energy Information Administration reports that about one third of the electricity consumed in Idaho arrives over interstate transmission lines from out of state 1 2. And it is almost always deployed to imply something false: that Idaho is energy-poor, energy-dependent, and at the mercy of out-of-state suppliers, and that therefore any generation project proposed on Idaho ground deserves a rubber stamp 3.

The number deserves a closer look, because nearly everything the casual listener concludes from it is wrong.

Myth one: "imported" means someone else's power

The word import conjures a picture of Idaho as a customer at somebody else's counter, dependent on the goodwill and pricing of foreign suppliers. The state's own energy office tells a different story. According to the Idaho Governor's Office of Energy and Mineral Resources, Idaho utilities generate approximately 45 percent of the electricity used in the state, another 23 percent comes from combined heat and power facilities and independent power producers, and the remaining 30 percent consists of market

BY THE NUMBERS

1/3

Share of Idaho's electricity use met by imports, down from more than half in 1990

#3

Idaho's rank for lowest residential electricity prices, 2024 (after North Dakota and Utah)

671.5 MW

Idaho Power's out-of-state generation shares: Jim Bridger (388 MW) + North Valmy (283.5 MW)

69%

Renewable share of in-state generation in 2024, fifth-highest of any state

DOCUMENT

Verified edition, July 18, 2026. All 24 factual claims verified against primary sources; calculations explained; full glossary; five public questions.

purchases and, this is the part that matters, energy imports from out-of-state generating resources owned by Idaho utilities ⁴. The EIA says the same thing in its current Idaho profile: the one third that crosses the state line comes from out-of-state generating facilities owned by Idaho utilities and from the Bonneville Power Administration ⁵.

Read that again. A substantial portion of Idaho's "imports" is Idaho's own fleet, parked across a border. Idaho Power owns one third of the Jim Bridger plant in Wyoming, with a company share of 388 megawatts of natural gas-fired capacity following the unit conversions, and co-owns the North Valmy plant in Nevada with NV Energy, holding a share of 283.5 megawatts ⁶. Those plants were built for Idaho's utility, are paid for in Idaho electric rates, are dedicated to Idaho load, and sit in Idaho Power's rate base under the jurisdiction of the Idaho Public Utilities Commission, which sets the depreciation schedules and cost recovery for both plants in Idaho customers' rates ⁷. Calling that power an "import" is like calling the crop from your own back forty an import because the property line runs through the field. The electron crosses a state boundary; the ownership, the cost, and the benefit never leave Idaho.

Myth two: imports mean dependence

The residual share, the genuine market purchases, is routinely painted as vulnerability. It is closer to the opposite: it is shopping. Idaho's utilities participate in the Western Energy Imbalance Market, which lets them buy and sell power close to the moment of consumption, easing transmission congestion and securing supply at lower cost ⁸. The state energy office attributes the growth in imports between 2019 and 2023, more than 40 percent in that window, largely to exactly this market participation ⁹.

That is not a state failing to feed itself. That is a utility with some of the cheapest baseload supply in America, a hydro backbone anchored by the three-dam Hells Canyon Complex on the Snake River, which the EIA identifies as the nation's largest privately owned hydroelectric generating facility ¹⁰, choosing to buy market power in the hours when the market is cheaper than running its own thermal units, and selling its own power in the hours when the trade runs the other way. Households do not call it dependence when they buy groceries instead of butchering the steer; they call it economics. A utility that refused to trade and insisted on

generating every megawatt-hour within the state line at any cost would deliver its customers nothing but a higher bill.

The prices tell the story the import statistic obscures. Idaho had the third-lowest average residential electricity price of any state in 2024, behind only North Dakota and Utah, a ranking the EIA attributes in part to the state's inexpensive hydropower, which supplied 44 percent of in-state generation that year ¹¹. Idaho Power's customers pay prices 20 to 30 percent below the national average ¹². Dependent states do not sit at the bottom of the national price table. They sit at the top.

Myth three: the number is fixed

The one-third figure is treated as a permanent condition of Idaho life. It is a snapshot of a moving object, and the object has been moving in one direction for a generation. As recently as 1990, Idaho imported more than half of its electricity; the EIA's own analysis notes the import share has declined substantially since ¹³. In-state generation has grown. Renewable resources generated about 69 percent of Idaho's in-state electricity in 2024, the fifth-highest share of any state, behind Vermont, South Dakota, Washington, and Maine ¹⁴. Meanwhile the out-of-border coal fleet that constituted much of the historical "import" is being wound down on a published schedule. Two of Jim Bridger's four units converted from coal to natural gas in early 2024; North Valmy's first unit converted in 2025 and its second in 2026; and Idaho Power is scheduled to exit participation in coal-fired operations at Bridger entirely by the end of 2030 ^{15 16}.

The transmission picture is changing too. The Boardman-to-Hemingway line, a 500-kilovolt, approximately 290-mile connection between the Longhorn Substation near Boardman, Oregon, and Idaho Power's Hemingway Substation in Owyhee County, Idaho, began construction in 2025 and remains under construction as of this writing, with the company aiming to finish the line in 2027 ^{17 18}. When energized, it will carry up to 1,000 megawatts in each direction, deepening Idaho's access to the Pacific Northwest's hydro-rich grid both ways ¹⁹. In an interconnected western market where power flows to price by the hour, the state-line accounting that produces the one-third statistic is bookkeeping, not geopolitics.

Myth four: the statistic proves we must approve everything

Here is why the myth matters, and why it gets repeated. The one-third figure is the standard opening move for any developer who wants Idaho ground: the state is energy-hungry, the argument runs, so this project, whatever it is, wherever it is, whoever it serves, is self-evidently necessary. The number did duty in the Lava Ridge fight; the project's developer, Magic Valley Energy, cited the EIA's one-third import figure in making its case ²⁰. It does duty in every data center pitch. It will do duty again.

But follow the ownership and the argument collapses. Idaho's existing supply arrangement, which combines cheap owned hydro, owned thermal capacity across two borders, and disciplined market purchases, serves existing Idaho load reliably at nearly the lowest prices in America ^{21 22}. New generation proposed for Idaho ground is overwhelmingly not about closing some phantom one-third gap in Idaho's kitchen; it is about serving new large loads and export markets, monetizing Idaho's open land and Idaho's cheap-power reputation for customers who are not Idahoans. That may or may not be a deal worth making, but it should be argued on its own terms, with the costs and revenues on the table, not smuggled past the public behind a statistic that implies Idaho households are one dry winter from the dark.

The honest statement of Idaho's position is this: Idaho is not energy-poor. It is energy-cheap, energy-clean by the standard measures, and energy-shrewd. It is a state whose utilities own their supply wherever the map happens to put it, trade the hourly market to their customers' advantage, and deliver among the lowest bills in the country while doing it ^{23 24}. The next time the one-third figure is offered as the reason Idaho must say yes to something, the right response is not to dispute the number. It is to ask the only question the number never answers: who owns the power, who pays for it, and who is the new project actually for?

Five Questions the Public Is Likely to Ask

1. If Idaho imports a third of its electricity, how can you say we are not dependent on other states? Because a large share of that "imported" power comes from plants Idaho's own utilities own and pay for; they simply sit in Wyoming and Nevada. The rest is mostly deliberate market purchases made because buying in a given hour

is cheaper than generating. Ownership and control matter more than which side of a state line a smokestack or a dam sits on.

2. Could Idaho run out of power if other states stopped selling to us? The western grid does not work as a set of state-by-state faucets that neighbors can shut off. Idaho utilities hold ownership shares in out-of-state plants, long-standing transmission rights, and membership in a regional market designed to balance supply hour by hour. Reliability planning happens through utility integrated resource plans reviewed by regulators, not through the goodwill of neighboring states.

3. If we are so energy-rich, why do developers keep saying Idaho needs more generation? Because the import statistic is a convenient sales tool. Most large new projects are aimed at serving new demand, such as data centers and regional export markets, not at closing a gap in supply for existing Idaho households. That can be a legitimate business, but it should be debated as what it is.

4. Will Idaho's bills go up when the coal plants close? The coal units at Jim Bridger and North Valmy are converting to natural gas or retiring on a schedule the utility filed with regulators, and the costs of that transition are reviewed by the Idaho Public Utilities Commission before they reach rates. Nothing in the closure schedule changes the fundamental driver of Idaho's low prices, which is cheap hydropower.

5. What does the Boardman-to-Hemingway line actually do for Idaho? It adds a high-capacity path between southwest Idaho and the Pacific Northwest, letting Idaho Power import power during hot summer peaks and sell power the other direction when the trade favors it. It moves electricity both ways, which is exactly why the simple import-versus-export framing keeps losing its meaning.

Calculations Explained

The one-third import share. The EIA estimates the share of Idaho's electricity that comes from out of state by comparing electricity consumed in Idaho with electricity generated inside the state. The difference, called net interstate flow, is the amount that must arrive over interstate transmission lines. Dividing that net inflow by total consumption yields roughly one third. This is an accounting of where generation is located, not of who owns it or who pays for it.

The 45 + 23 + 30 supply breakdown. The Idaho Governor's Office of Energy and Mineral Resources reports that Idaho utilities generate approximately 45 percent of the electricity used in the state, combined heat and power facilities and independent power producers supply 23 percent, and the remaining 30 percent is market purchases plus energy from out-of-state resources owned by Idaho utilities. The three figures are rounded, which is why 45 + 23 + 30 sums to 98 rather than exactly 100; the office presents them as approximate shares of total supply.

Import growth of more than 40 percent, 2019 to 2023. Growth over a period is calculated as (ending value minus starting value) divided by starting value. The state energy office reports that Idaho's electricity imports in 2023 exceeded their 2019 level by more than 40 percent and attributes the increase largely to utilities trading in the Western Energy Imbalance Market, where higher trading volumes register as higher gross imports even when they lower total cost.

Idaho Power's Jim Bridger share. Idaho Power owns one third of the Jim Bridger plant; PacifiCorp owns the other two thirds. The company reports its share of the plant's natural gas-fired capacity, after the conversion of two units in early 2024, as 388 megawatts. One third of capacity implies the two converted units total about 1,164 megawatts (388 multiplied by 3), or roughly 580 megawatts per unit.

Idaho Power's North Valmy share. Idaho Power co-owns North Valmy with NV Energy and reports its share of generating capacity as 283.5 megawatts. A half interest implies a total plant capacity of about 567 megawatts (283.5 multiplied by 2).

The price ranking. The EIA ranks states by average residential electricity price, measured in cents per kilowatt-hour, calculated as total residential revenue divided by total residential kilowatt-hours sold. On that measure Idaho ranked third lowest in 2024, after North Dakota and Utah.

Glossary of Terms

Balancing authority. The entity responsible for keeping electricity supply and demand matched in real time within a defined portion of the grid.

Baseload. Generation that runs more or less continuously to serve the minimum level of demand, as distinct from resources that

ramp up for peaks.

Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). The federal agency that markets power from federal dams and other facilities in the Pacific Northwest, supplying many municipal utilities and rural cooperatives, including in Idaho.

Combined heat and power (CHP). A facility, often at an industrial site, that generates electricity and captures the resulting heat for productive use, raising overall efficiency.

Independent power producer (IPP). A generator not owned by a regulated utility that sells its output under contract or into markets.

Integrated resource plan (IRP). The long-range plan a utility files with regulators, typically every two years, showing how it intends to meet projected demand with generation, transmission, and efficiency.

Kilovolt (kV). One thousand volts; a measure of transmission line voltage. Higher voltage lines carry more power over longer distances with lower losses.

Megawatt (MW). One million watts; a measure of generating capacity. A megawatt-hour (MWh) is one megawatt sustained for one hour, a measure of energy actually delivered.

Market purchase. Electricity a utility buys from wholesale markets rather than generating from its own plants.

Net importer. A state or region that consumes more electricity than it generates within its borders, with the balance arriving over interstate transmission lines.

Net interstate flow. The difference between electricity consumed in a state and electricity generated in it; the quantity that must flow in (or out) across state lines.

Rate base. The total value of a utility's investments, including power plants, on which regulators allow it to earn a return through customer rates.

Thermal unit. A generator that produces electricity from heat, such as a coal-fired or natural gas-fired unit.

Transmission line. High-voltage lines that move bulk electricity over long distances between generating plants and local

distribution systems.

Utility-scale. Generating facilities of one megawatt or larger, as distinct from small customer-sited systems such as rooftop solar.

Western Energy Imbalance Market (WEIM). A real-time wholesale market operated by the California Independent System Operator that lets participating western utilities buy and sell power close to the moment of consumption, reducing costs and easing congestion.

Document Metadata

Description (150 characters): Idaho “imports a third of its electricity.” Technically true, usually misleading: much of it is Idaho-owned power parked across a state line.

Longer description: Issue No. 3 of the Feeding the Beast series takes apart the most repeated statistic in Idaho energy policy: that the state imports about one third of its electricity. The number is technically true and almost always deployed to imply something false, that Idaho is energy-poor and must approve any generation project proposed on its ground. The article walks through four myths: that imported means someone else’s power, that imports mean dependence, that the number is fixed, and that the statistic obligates approval.

Summary: A substantial portion of Idaho’s “imports” is generation Idaho Power owns out of state: one third of the Jim Bridger plant in Wyoming (388 MW gas-fired share after conversion) and a 283.5 MW share of North Valmy in Nevada, both in Idaho Power’s rate base. Genuine market purchases through the Western Energy Imbalance Market are shopping, not dependence. Idaho had the third-lowest residential electricity price in the nation in 2024, with hydropower supplying 44 percent of in-state generation and renewables 69 percent, the fifth-highest share of any state. The import share has fallen from more than half in 1990, and Boardman-to-Hemingway (500 kV, ~290 miles, up to 1,000 MW each direction, construction begun 2025, target 2027) blurs the state-line accounting further. The question the statistic never answers: who owns the power, who pays for it, and who is a new project actually for?

Keywords: net importer, Idaho electricity, EIA, Jim Bridger, North Valmy, Idaho Power, hydropower, Hells Canyon Complex, Western

Energy Imbalance Market, Boardman-to-Hemingway, rate base, IPUC, electricity prices, renewables share, energy policy, Magic Valley, transmission, market purchases

Footnotes and Citations

1. U.S. Energy Information Administration, Today in Energy, "More than 80% of Idaho's in-state electricity generation comes from renewables," April 5, 2019. States that Idaho requires imports totaling about one third of demand; that as recently as 1990 the state imported more than half of its electricity; and that the nation's largest privately owned hydroelectric generating facility is a three-dam complex on the Snake River in Hells Canyon. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=38952>
2. U.S. Energy Information Administration, Idaho State Energy Profile Analysis, last updated June 20, 2025. States that about one third of the electricity consumed in Idaho arrives over interstate transmission lines from out-of-state generating facilities owned by Idaho utilities and from the Bonneville Power Administration; that renewable resources generated about 69 percent of Idaho's in-state electricity in 2024, the fifth-highest share of any state after Vermont, South Dakota, Washington, and Maine; that hydropower provided 44 percent of in-state generation in 2024; and that Idaho had the nation's third-lowest average residential electricity price in 2024, after North Dakota and Utah. <https://www.eia.gov/state/analysis.php?sid=ID>
3. Magic Valley Energy, "Increasing Access to Sustainable Energy for Idaho and the West," accessed July 18, 2026. The Lava Ridge developer's argument states, citing the EIA, that Idaho imports a third of its electricity from other states. <https://www.magicvalleyenergy.com/increasing-access-to-sustainable-energy-for-idaho-and-the-west/>
4. Idaho Governor's Office of Energy and Mineral Resources, 2025 Idaho Energy and Mineral Landscape. States that Idaho's utilities generate approximately 45 percent of the electricity utilized in-state; that 23 percent is provided by combined heat and power or independent power producers; that the remaining 30 percent is comprised of market purchases and energy imports from out-of-state generating resources owned by Idaho utilities; that imports grew over 40 percent from 2019 to 2023, likely attributable to Idaho utilities' involvement in the Western Energy Imbalance Market; and that Idaho Power's residential, business, and agricultural customers pay electricity prices 20 to 30 percent below the national average. <https://oemr.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025-Idaho-Energy-and-Mineral-Landscape.pdf>
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6. Idaho Power, "Natural Gas" (energy sources), accessed July 18, 2026. States that Idaho Power is one-third owner of the Bridger plant; that the company's share of the plant's natural gas-fired capacity is 388 MW; that two Bridger units were converted in early 2024 to use natural gas instead of coal; that one North Valmy unit was converted to natural gas in 2025 and the second in 2026; and that Idaho Power's share of North Valmy generating capacity is 283.5 MW. <https://www.idahopower.com/energy-environment/energy/energy-sources/natural-gas/>

7. Clearing Up (NewsData), "Idaho Regulators Approve Faster Bridger Depreciation for Idaho Power," June 2022. Reports the Idaho Public Utilities Commission's approval of accelerated depreciation for Idaho Power's Jim Bridger investment, reflecting the commission's ratemaking jurisdiction over the company's out-of-state plant shares. https://www.newsdata.com/clearing_up/supply_and_demand/idaho-regulators-approve-faster-bridger-depreciation-for-idaho-power/article_90f2265e-f3e8-11ec-a9e8-3743d1375d6b.html
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11. U.S. Energy Information Administration, Idaho State Energy Profile Analysis, last updated June 20, 2025. States that about one third of the electricity consumed in Idaho arrives over interstate transmission lines from out-of-state generating facilities owned by Idaho utilities and from the Bonneville Power Administration; that renewable resources generated about 69 percent of Idaho's in-state electricity in 2024, the fifth-highest share of any state after Vermont, South Dakota, Washington, and Maine; that hydropower provided 44 percent of in-state generation in 2024; and that Idaho had the nation's third-lowest average residential electricity price in 2024, after North Dakota and Utah. <https://www.eia.gov/state/analysis.php?sid=ID>
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15. Idaho Power, "Natural Gas" (energy sources), accessed July 18, 2026. States that Idaho Power is one-third owner of the Bridger plant; that the company's share of the plant's natural gas-fired capacity is 388 MW; that two Bridger units were converted in early 2024 to use natural gas instead of coal; that one North Valmy unit was converted to natural gas in 2025 and the second in 2026; and that Idaho Power's share of North Valmy generating capacity is 283.5 MW. <https://www.idahopower.com/energy-environment/energy/energy-sources/natural-gas/>[e](#)

16. Idaho Power, "Our Path Away from Coal," accessed July 18, 2026. States that Idaho Power is scheduled to exit participation in coal-fired operations at Bridger by the end of 2030; that Idaho Power owns one third of Bridger and PacifiCorp two thirds; that North Valmy is co-owned with NV Energy; and that North Valmy's second unit stopped burning coal and was undergoing conversion to natural gas with generation expected to resume by summer 2026. <https://www.idahopower.com/energy-environment/energy/energy-sources/our-path-away-from-coal/>[e](#)

17. Idaho Power, "Boardman to Hemingway: Purpose and Need," accessed July 18, 2026. States that the project is a 500-kilovolt transmission line running approximately 290 miles from the Longhorn Substation four miles east of Boardman, Oregon, to Idaho Power's existing Hemingway Substation in Owyhee County, Idaho; that it will deliver up to 1,000 megawatts in each direction; that construction began in 2025; and that the company hopes to finish the line in 2027. The draft of this article described the line as roughly 300 miles; the figure has been corrected to approximately 290 miles per Idaho Power. <https://www.idahopower.com/energy-environment/energy/planning-and-electrical-projects/current-projects/boardman-to-hemingway/purpose-and-need/>[e](#)

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