

COVER STORY

Get wind policy right and we'll become energy exporter

Recent coverage of tight energy supplies in Ireland is a useful reminder of the need to speed up the deployment of renewable power to ensure a more secure supply of electricity, writes Noel Cunniffe, CEO, Wind Energy Ireland.

While concern is understandable, it is important to be clear that the lights will stay on this winter. While speaking recently to Oireachtas members, Mark Foley, CEO of EirGrid, which manages Ireland's electricity transmission system, reassured them that "people can sleep in their beds at night and be satisfied they will have electricity".

As a former EirGrid employee myself, I know the organisation takes nothing more seriously than ensuring that, when you flick the switch, the lights come on. I believe the immediate risk to our electricity supply is passing but this does not mean we should become complacent.

There are three main reasons why energy security has become such a challenge in recent months.

First, because of a number of global factors, the international price of gas has risen rapidly in recent months, up 200/300% over last year. While wind energy provided around 38% of Ireland's electricity in 2020, most of our power still comes from gas. So, when the price of gas rises internationally, we are especially vulnerable.

Second, two of Ireland's most efficient and largest gas generators have been offline for repair for most of the year. This means we have had to rely on older and less-efficient generating plant. These charge more for the power they produce and they are already buying gas at much higher prices.

Finally, while wind energy had, to the end of September, provided almost 30% of Ireland's electricity for the year to date, this was down on last year. The more wind on the system, the less we rely on imported fossil fuels and the lower the price of electricity on the wholesale market, which is the biggest factor in electricity bills.

Solutions at hand

If all of this sounds a bit ominous, the good news is that the solutions are also at hand. The immediate fix is to get the two offline generators, Whitegate in Cork and Huntstown in Dublin, back working. Both are expected to be fully operational by the end of November and this will have an immediate positive impact on both the price of electricity and the security of our supply.

The more long-term solution is that we must reduce our reliance on imported fossil fuels for our electricity and accelerate the shift to renewable energy and supporting technologies like battery storage. We need our own secure source of electricity, generated and used here in Ireland, and to reduce our vulnerability to what will be an increasingly expensive gas market in the years to come.

Now for where the news gets really good. Ireland has some of the best wind energy resources in the world and a growing pipeline of projects, both onshore and offshore, that are moving through the development process. Specifically, the development of offshore wind energy is accelerating and we are working to deliver 5,000MW by 2030. To put that in context, the highest level of demand ever on the island of Ireland electricity system is just under 6,900 MW.

The Programme for Government has a long-term ambition for 30,000MW of offshore wind energy off our west coast. This would be much more than enough to meet all of Ireland's future energy needs. That volume of electricity generation would make Ireland a major net exporter of electricity to other European markets. Put simply, we have more wind energy available than we will ever need for our own domestic purposes.

But as well as developing wind energy, we also need a more diverse supply of electricity. We cannot rely on wind alone. Next year will see grid-scale solar energy projects start to come online for the first time. This is particularly important because the times of year when wind levels are low, from July to August, are the times when solar energy generation is at its best.

We also need to see battery storage projects connect to the electricity grid. These can store wind and solar power when there is more renewable energy available than there is demand. We can then use this power for short periods at times during the day when there is peak demand for electricity. This is a cheaper alternative to using fossil fuels and has the advantage of being low to zero carbon.

We already have around 350MW of battery storage on the system and another 1,500MW with planning permissions waiting to be built.

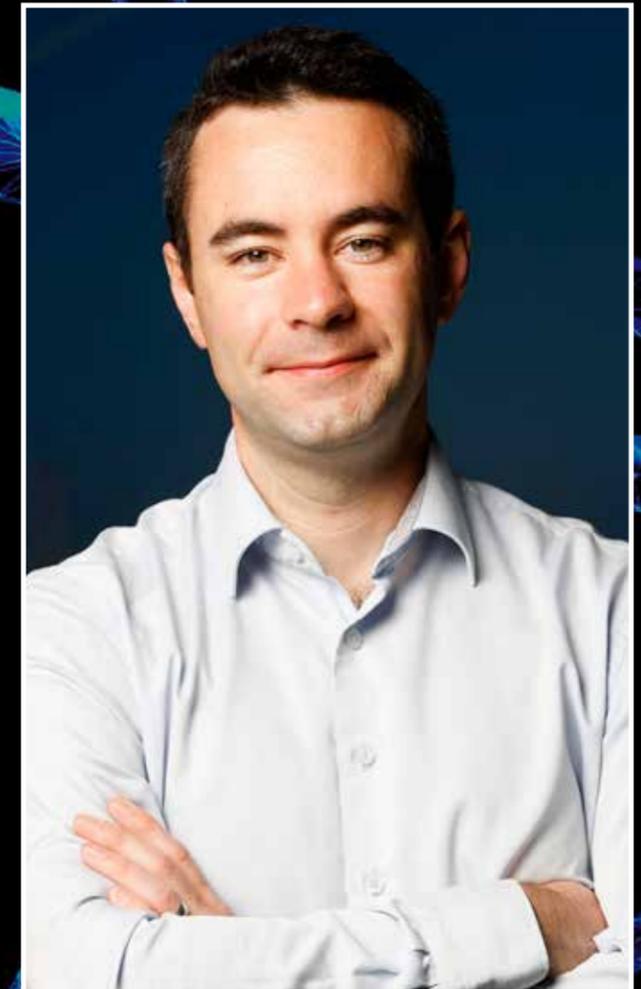
Gas generation

However, none of this means that we will have gas off our electricity system anytime soon. The Irish Government's target is to have up to 80% of our electricity coming from renewable energy by 2030, which means the rest will come from gas generation. This will help to provide

stability and a secure electricity supply as we move towards a zero-carbon electricity system in the early 2030s.

We know we have the projects. We have the investment, private and public, to develop the renewable energy and the infrastructure we need, and we can do it at a good price for the electricity consumer. As more and more of our power comes from Irish renewable energy and we have to rely less on imported fossil fuels, our electricity supply will become more secure and we will be insulated from rising gas prices.

In the coming years we need to accelerate not only the development of renewable energy, but also the recruitment and training of engineers and heat pump installers to deliver the ambition for 400,000 retrofits by 2030. They can then do their jobs confident in the knowledge that their colleagues in the renewable energy industry, and those responsible for Ireland's electricity system, will deliver. ■



Noel Cunniffe, CEO, Wind Energy Ireland.