Power Needs Growing

ELECTRIC power has become a necessity of life, ranking close behind water, food and shelter. In fact, electricity is needed to pump water for domestic and industrial uses, for irrigating crops, and for processing and refrigerating our food.

Long lists could be compiled of other uses or needs of electricity for our comfort, convenience, profit and entertainment.

Most of us tend to assume that electricity will always be there at the flip of a switch, just like we expect water to flow when we turn a tap. Large scale loss of either may be catastrophic, as may be seen now in the Gulf Coast region where thousands of homes and businesses have been without electric service because of Hurricane Alicia.

Such natural disasters are unpreventable, but we face another electric power threat that can be avoided. That is the possibility that demand may get ahead of generating capacity. The U.S. Committee for Energy Awareness, in national magazine advertisements, foresees such a situation.

The committee states that during the past 10 years, Americans have cut back on virtually all non-electric forms of energy, but that use of electric power actually has risen more than 20 percent. Further increases are expected as the economy improves.

"Even if the increase is small compared to previous decades, say 2 percent a year, that would still result in a 50 percent increase in the need for electricity over the next 20 years," the public service message states. "To supply this amount we would have to build the equivalent of around 300 large generating stations."

What many don't realize is that it takes energy to make energy. Nearly all available sites for feasible hydroelectric plants have already been utilized. Experts anticipate that oil and natural gas resources will diminish and cost more to use. Coal is abundant, but environmental regulations restrict its use.

Nuclear power now provides about one-eighth of the nation's electricity, but panicky opposition by "anti-nukes" is obstructing further development. And in April, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states may ban new nuclear plants until safe methods are devised for disposing of radioactive wastes.

Nevertheless, nuclear energy may offer our best long range solution. Robert E. Kirby, chairman of Westinghouse, says the average cost of a kilowatt hour of electricity produced by nuclear plants is 15 percent less than generation by coal and 60 percent less than by oil.

Thus it becomes clear that if we are to have sufficient, economical electricity for the future we must overcome obstacles to expanded production. It takes years to bring new electric generating plants into operation, whether the fuel is coal, oil, gas or uranium, but the demand for power grows daily.