Four Corners Coal Plant

The California Public Utilities Commission looked pretty good, back in 2007, when it created a rule prohibiting utilities from making new long-term investments in power plants emitting more carbon dioxide than an efficient natural gas plant. That meant no new conventional coal plants, which emit twice as much carbon dioxide as a natural gas plant. The Legislature liked what the Commission did so much that it created a new statute assuring that the Commission could not change its mind.

Well, the Commission changed its mind. Southern California Edison, which owns about 750 megawatts of generating capacity in the Four Corners coal complex, has gained the Commission's approval of a plan to invest another $178 million in retrofits that will allow the plant to continue spewing greenhouse gases in abundance for at least another five years. The Commission says that it really means it this time – no new additional extensions.

The issues surrounding these matters can be complex, the written decision has yet to be made public, and it is whole lot easier to be a Monday morning quarterback. But this much is for certain: while saying "yes" to another few years of coal burning by Edison (because the power it produces is so important), the Commission has been saying "no" to Pacific Gas & Electric Company's effort to build a new natural gas plant (because the power isn't needed). Perhaps Edison and PG&E ought to sit down and talk. There are ways to avoid continual reliance on Four Corners Coal. These choices are hard, but the stakes could not be higher.