

Fla. Considers Renewable Energy Bill

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 Associated Press

Updated: 4:31 p.m. ET March 28, 2007

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Florida would have the most stringent renewable energy requirements for electricity generation in the nation, under a bill to be considered Thursday by a Senate committee.

The Senate's energy plan would require half of new electricity in Florida to be generated with renewable energies such as biomass, wind and solar by 2017. The Sunshine State currently generates less than 10 percent of its electricity using nuclear power and other renewable fuels, instead relying primarily on natural gas, coal and petroleum — all fossil fuels.

The 50 percent figure may change during upcoming negotiations, but it signals that some state lawmakers want Florida to join at least 20 other states and the District of Columbia, which currently have renewable portfolio standards for electricity production. Minnesota, for example, has a requirement of 25 percent by 2025 — the highest percentage of any state to date, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

"I think it's very bold to set an aggressive goal like that," said Susan Glickman, a consultant for the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy. "I think it will certainly cause people to look at what's in the realm of the possible for Florida."

However, the House energy plan approved Wednesday by the Environment and Natural Resources Council rejects a renewable energy mandate. It opts instead for tax incentives and grants to spur the production of renewable fuels such as

ethanol, which experts have said could be readily produced in Florida using materials such as citrus and yard waste.

The Senate plan also contains tax incentives, but its author believes a mandate is the best way to spur needed investment in renewable energy to offset Florida's dependence on foreign oil.

"We're dragging the power companies kicking and screaming to the table," said Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton.

Rep. Bob Allen, R-Merritt Island, the House energy head, said incentives are a better way to get industry to partner in new initiatives.

"Mandating is the old central government model where it's Soviet style. You're telling people, 'You shall do this,' and you hope they will," Allen said. "You can't make people spend and invest dollars ... with a mandate as fast as you can when you incentivize it."

Florida Power and Light, the state's largest electricity producer, had not had time to digest the Senate proposal.

"We'll evaluate it," said spokesman Mayco Villafana.

The Senate bill contains another provision that has historically been unappealing to power companies. It would require the creation of a net-metering program, in which electricity customers who have installed solar or wind technologies in their homes and businesses would receive credit for excess power they send back out onto the grid.

Currently, there is no incentive for people to use those technologies because they may not get credit for the energy they produce.

Allen has said the House will likely wait until next year to look at net-metering so that other policies can settle into place.

The Senate bill would also create the Florida Alternative Energy Development Corp., with the governor as chairman of the board, to centralize the state's energy efforts that are now shared by multiple agencies.

Both chambers want to create incentives for the purchase of hybrid and renewable fuel vehicles, and to give property tax breaks for the installation of renewable energy technologies such as solar panels. And both require the Department of Environmental Protection to conduct inventories of greenhouse gas emissions.

If the Senate renewable portfolio plan prevails, it will amount to a mandated carbon emissions reduction because the 50 percent requirement would come through the use of clean technologies.

Talk of global warming, high energy prices and national security concerns have made renewable energy a high priority for the first time in Tallahassee.

"Other states have gotten it, and they're going for it," Allen said, "and if we don't we're just going to be sitting here bathing tourists."

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