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California Senate OKs renewable energy bill

Utilities in California would have to get a third of their power from renewable energy sources by 2020, up from a fifth. The bill is expected to pass in the Assembly.

February 25, 2011 | By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Sacramento — The state Senate acted Thursday to require California utilities to boost their use of wind, solar and other renewable energy sources to a third of total supply by the year 2020.

California law already requires utilities to get a fifth of their power from renewable energy. If this measure becomes law, utilities will be forced to lean even more heavily on green power — improving air quality and helping the economy in the process, supporters said. "Right now we can begin to create the jobs that this state so desperately needs," said state Sen. Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto), the bill's author.

The measure passed 26 to 11. The vote split largely along party lines but with a few crossovers.

Opponents said it would drive up electricity bills for homeowners and manufacturers. The additional costs would convince California companies, which already pay some of the highest energy costs in the nation, to move their jobs out of state, said Sen. Bob Huff (R-Diamond Bar).

"This is yet another nail in the coffin for our manufacturing sector in California," Huff said.

There is no consensus on the measure's true cost.

Simitian predicted a "modest short-term increase" in electricity bills, noting that his own utility in Sacramento offered to provide half his power from renewables for just \$3 a month extra.

In a report two years ago, the California Public Utilities Commission said energy costs would probably go up 7.1% if a third of electricity came from renewable sources. A spokeswoman for the agency said Thursday that some renewable energy prices have since declined, so the increase would probably not be so high.

But Sen. Roderick Wright (D-Inglewood) opposed the bill, saying it could max out supplies and increase electricity bills by 15% to 20%, triggering another energy crisis in California.

Building the facilities needed to generate and transmit solar, wind and geothermal energy could require an investment of \$115 billion, the PUC has estimated. Simitian said that would create 100,000 to 200,000 new jobs.

Most Republicans voted against the measure Thursday. But GOP Sens. Tony Strickland of Moorpark and Sharon Runner of Lancaster crossed party lines to support it. Runner predicted many of the new solar and wind-power jobs would go to the High Desert sections of her district, where unemployment is high.

The bill, which would give the force of law to a target set by former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in a 2009 executive order, now goes to the Assembly, where it is expected to pass.

Supporters said the 33% target for renewables would put California ahead of the rest of the country in green-energy use. It was also a key plank in Gov. Jerry Brown's campaign platform last year, but he has not made a final decision on supporting the measure.

The governor "will closely consider any bill that reaches his desk," said spokesman Evan Westrup.

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