



ENERGY POLICY: Senate panel to take up hydropower, water use measures

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The Senate Energy and Natural Resources panel convenes Thursday to discuss three measures that address hydropower and the impact of energy development on water resources.

The committee's third legislative hearing this Congress will focus on two bills to boost hydropower in the United States and on the water section of the broad energy bill that passed out of the committee in 2009.

First up on Thursday's agenda is S. 629, a bipartisan bill from ranking member Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) and seven other senators that would advance hydropower project deployment by requiring better interagency coordination, funding competitive grants for increased production and investing in more research and development.

The measure has broad industry support.

"Clean, safe and domestic hydropower can help us reach our shared clean energy goals," Murkowski said in a statement earlier this month when the bill was introduced. "Our bill achieves common-sense regulatory reform, spurs economic growth and takes advantage of hydropower's position as the country's leading source of clean, renewable energy."

Specifically, the measure would establish a competitive grant program for efficiency improvements or capacity additions at existing dams. It also would direct the Energy Department to help ramp up domestic hydropower production through research, development and demonstration projects. Additionally, it would give the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission authority to extend preliminary permit terms, to work with other federal agencies to streamline the review process for small hydropower projects and to consider a possible two-year licensing process for hydropower development at non-powered dams.

"This bill allows us to highlight the potential for development of additional hydropower resources in an environmentally responsible way," Bingaman said in a statement.

Other measures

The committee also will consider a related bill (S. 630) from Murkowski and Sen. Mark Begich (D-Alaska) that would promote development of marine and hydrokinetic energy resources by promoting research, testing and certification of the new technologies.

Marine and hydrokinetic energy technologies, like traditional powered dams, harness the energy of moving water to generate electricity. But the technologies do not have to be installed on rivers or streams. They can capture energy from waves and currents as well.

Specifically, the measure authorizes \$225 million in federal spending for fiscal 2012 through 2014, a figure that may raise the eyebrows of more fiscally conservative Republican members of the panel. But the spending would be offset by reprogramming previous authorizations, and the funding level is less than a similar 2009 bill from Murkowski.

Finally, the committee will hear testimony on a section of the broad energy bill it passed on a bipartisan vote last Congress. The energy and water integration section of S. 1462 addresses the relationship between energy production and water use and deals specifically with power plant water and energy efficiency, calling for a comprehensive water use and energy savings study.

Schedule: The hearing is Thursday, March 31, at 9:30 a.m. in 366 Dirksen.

Witnesses: TBA.