

Lawmakers send Jerry Brown bill on renewable energy requirements

Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee, 3-30-11

California would vastly increase its commitment to wind, solar, geothermal and other renewable energy under legislation that cleared the Legislature on Tuesday and was sent to Gov. Jerry Brown.

The measure would require public and private utilities to obtain 33 percent of their electricity from renewable energy sources by 2020, a sizable increase over the 20 percent required now.

"This bill establishes California as the national leader in clean energy, improving the environment and stimulating the economy while protecting ratepayers from excessive costs," said Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, who proposed Senate Bill X1 2.

Simitian's bill passed the Assembly on Tuesday, 55-19, with most Republicans opposing it. The Senate approved the measure last month, 26-11, with a similar party-line split.

Opponents contend the measure will hurt California's economy and residents' pocketbooks by increasing future electricity prices.

"This is the kind of legislation that does damage to the economic health and well-being of California," said Assemblyman Dan Logue, R-Linda.

Brown has not taken a position on Simitian's bill, but he is "broadly supportive of codifying the requirement that 33 percent of the state's electricity come from renewable sources," spokeswoman Elizabeth Ashford said.

The state Public Utilities Commission estimated in 2009 that adoption of such a standard would require tens of billions of dollars to implement and hike electricity expenditures by 7.1 percent, although those figures may now be too high because of lower projections of energy demand in 2020, according to a legislative committee analysis of Simitian's bill.

Simitian touted renewable energy as a wise investment.

"Fossil fuels are finite, and demand for energy is growing," he said. "Fossil fuel prices are going to keep heading up. Renewable prices are headed down."

Supporters of bolstering California's commitment to renewable energy say it would attract jobs, improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, lessen the state's reliance on foreign oil, and spark investment that would create much-needed jobs for a battered economy.

Assemblyman Curt Hagman, R-Chino Hills, said the bill's prospects for attracting green energy businesses and creating new jobs is muted by its higher costs to existing businesses.

"How many jobs will we lose for every one we gain?" Hagman asked.

Utilities can seek exemptions from the Public Utilities Commission if renewable energy becomes too costly or too difficult to move into the state's grid.

Simitian has failed several times to bolster the state's renewable energy commitment. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed his proposal in 2009. Last year's attempt, Senate Bill 722, died in the Senate on the final day of the two-year session.