

States Power Renewable-Energy Push

Patchwork of Laws Crops Up Amid a Lack of Initiative From Federal Government

By John J. Fialka

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WASHINGTON -- Twenty-two states have passed laws requiring that a growing percentage of electricity come from renewable-energy sources, such as wind and solar power. The effort has helped launch \$475 million in energy projects.

A study prepared by the University of Michigan calls it a "classic case in federalism" with states experimenting with new and usually nonpolluting energy sources. Barry Rabe, a professor of public policy and author of the study, said the movement reminds him of state experiments in the 1920s that eventually led to the federal Social Security Act and other New Deal programs in the 1930s.

"These states have had very little contact with federal officials. There's this disconnect," he explained, noting that both the Bush administration and Congress have rejected a federal program.

The study notes that state programs began in the 1990s by requiring utilities to have a "renewable-portfolio standard," meaning that a small percentage of their electricity should be generated by wind turbines or other relatively clean energy sources. Iowa was the pioneer in 1991. Other states, like Nevada and Texas, have repeatedly raised targets for renewable energy.

The 22 states with programs account for more than half of the nation's population. The District of Columbia also has a program.

The current leaders in state mandates are California, which requires 33% renewable energy by 2020; New York, which requires 25% by 2013; and Nevada, which calls for 20% by 2015. The study says that the standards, which vary in their terms and even in the definition of "renewable" power, enjoy bipartisan support in state legislatures. President Bush signed the Texas law when he was governor in 1999.

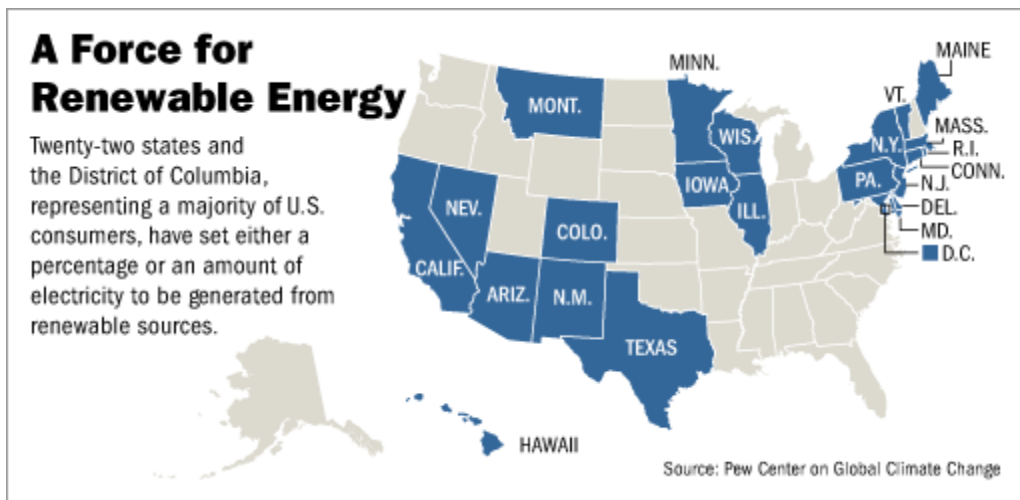
Prof. Rabe's study notes some of the state projects face challenges. Massachusetts's largest wind-power project has run into stiff political opposition from beachfront landowners who oppose a plan to build wind turbines in Nantucket Sound. Texas may have trouble siting transmission lines needed to bring electricity from big wind farms in the West to consumers in the East.

Because power grids don't coincide with state boundaries, a number of states are exploring how to trade renewable power. Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, which sponsored the Michigan study, said Washington could help set regional standards for such exchanges. "There's no excuse for the [federal] government not being a facilitator of this."

However, opposition from utilities and coal companies has defeated several attempts in Congress to impose a federal standard. "The crucial issue is, should the federal government impose a one-size-fits-all for all 50 states. We don't think it should," said Jim Owen, spokesman for the Edison Electric Institute, which represents the nation's privately owned utilities. He said some of the group's members support state standards.

A second study, by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, found 14 states are helping to finance renewable-power projects by imposing surcharges on retail electricity rates. So far, 250 projects are in the works costing \$475 million. Wind-power generation accounts for 60% of the projects, while electricity made from geothermal sources and power from gas generated by garbage dumps also are popular.

Lewis Milford, president of Clean Energy Group, a Vermont environmental organization that co-wrote the second study, said letting the states continue to experiment may be a good thing for the nation. "We're letting the states sort out what works and what doesn't."



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