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Report hails state's clean energy push

Group says federal policies hold back progress

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California air quality chief Mary Nichols and state Energy Commissioner James Boyd have joined environmental groups in touting a new report that holds California up as a national leader in clean energy policy.

They're calling on California's congressional delegation to follow the state's lead in pushing similar energy-saving initiatives as Congress is poised to vote on a federal energy bill.

"The next step is for federal policy to match what states are doing," said Nichols, the California Air Resources Board chairwoman appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The report by clean energy advocacy group Environment America lauds the Golden State for mandating renewable electricity-, vehicle- and appliance-efficiency standards and energy-efficient building codes.

While the federal government is lagging, the report says, states as a whole are doing much on their own to promote clean energy policies.

Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have mandated that more electricity come from renewable sources such as wind and solar power. Twelve states have standards for energy-efficient appliances and equipment, and a dozen states are requiring the rollout of cleaner-running cars.

That's leaving a lighter carbon footprint on the planet, the report found.

Renewable electricity standards adopted by more than two dozen states would reduce global warming pollution by about 2 percent of current levels, roughly equal to removing more than 21 million cars off roads. And, by 2020, low-emission vehicles would offset global warming emissions by 74 million metric tons per year – the equivalent of taking more than 13 million cars off roads.

In California, energy-saving approaches have reaped rewards. As of 2003, the state used less electricity per capita than any other state, the report said.

And the reductions can add up. If every state adopted California's energy-saving standards, the nation as a whole would consume 8 percent less electricity, according to the report.

This summer, the Senate and House passed separate energy bills. The Senate version bumps up fuel-efficiency standards, calling for a fleet of cars and light trucks that get 35 mpg by 2020. The House measure would require utilities to produce 15 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2020, and extend federal tax breaks for renewable energy.

Environmental groups fear negotiations to reconcile the House and Senate versions could produce a watered-down version that does little to address climate change and reduce dependence on oil.

Bill Magavern, a Sierra Club California lobbyist, said he favors a federal energy bill that, at a minimum,

increases fuel economy standards to at least 35 mpg, requires electricity to come from 15 percent renewable energy and offers tax credits for renewable energy.

Magavern said although California has benchmarks higher than these standards, these first steps are needed.

In 2002, California passed a law to cut global warming emissions by at least 30 percent by 2016. Earlier this month, the state sued the federal Environmental Protection Agency to get a waiver the state needs to reduce tailpipe emissions.

The state also needs federal tax credits granted to achieve goals under its Million Solar Roofs initiative, Magavern said.

Californians who want to install solar panels in their homes can take advantage of state and matching federal rebates that cut the cost in half.

"One million solar roofs rely on a federal tax credit which needs to be renewed," he said. "So far, we've seen tax incentives for solar and wind in fits and starts, while fossil fuel and nuclear industries have received billions and billions of dollars in subsidies."

While federal investment in renewable energy is lagging, a green energy tech sector is thriving in California.

Last week, a public policy group and an economic consulting firm launched a California Green Innovation Index, which tracks the state's clean energy technology boom.

According to the report by Palo Alto-based Next 10 and Collaborative Economics, California is the top state for U.S. venture capital investment in green technology, with \$884 million pumped in last year.

Energy Commissioner James Boyd said renewable energy entrepreneurs are making progress, but the federal government's help is needed to lower prices.

"There is lots of venture capital money out there, but they're not willing to take it all the way," Boyd said.

Touting California as an example, Nichols of the Air Resources Board said clean energy policies can be a boon to the economy.

The Next 10 report bolsters Nichols' claim: California is more energy-efficient and has lower greenhouse gas emissions than Germany, the United Kingdom and Japan. At the same time, the report found the state's per capita gross domestic product has continued to grow.

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