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## State Explores Alternative Energy Portfolio

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**The energy that powers many West Virginia homes and businesses currently comes from coal, but that may change in the future.**

Story by Walt Williams

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CHARLESTON -- The energy that powers many West Virginia homes and businesses currently comes from coal, but that may change in the future.

Many states across the nation have adopted energy portfolios that require them to get some of their energy from alternative sources such as wind and solar power. So far West Virginia hasn't adopted such a portfolio, but a special advisory committee is taking a look at what one may look like.



"The goal of these standards is to meet the demand for new energy with these renewable resources," said Christine Risch, director of research at Marshall University's Center for Business and Economic Research.

Risch spoke before the West Virginia Public Energy Authority Sept. 25. The authority is exploring an alternative energy portfolio, with the possibility of making a recommendation to the 2009 state Legislature.

So far, 30 states have adopted energy portfolios, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Four states have voluntary portfolios that set no mandates. The remaining states have all set mandatory deadlines for diversifying their portfolios.

Just what those portfolios look like vary from state to state. Ohio, for example, has adopted a portfolio that requires it to get 25 percent of its energy from alternative sources by 2025. At least half of that must come from renewable resources such as solar power, while the remaining must come from nuclear power or other non-renewable resources.

Other states have set less ambitious goals. Arizona requires that it get at least 15 percent of its energy from alternative sources by 2025. Montana requires that it get 15 percent of its energy from alternative sources by 2015, but only if it doesn't result in rate increases for consumers.

The cost to consumers for adopting an alternative energy portfolio wasn't discussed at the Sept. 25 hearing, but energy from renewable resources typically costs more than energy from traditional sources such as coal. West Virginians pay among the lowest electricity rates in the country at an average of about 6 cents for kilowatt-hour.

Typically a portfolio has two tiers of alternative energy sources, according to Risch. Renewable resources make up the first tier. Alternative, non-renewable resources such as coalbed methane and waste coal make up the second tier.

About 32 million megawatt hours were consumed in 2006, Rosch said. Most states set a goal of getting 12 to 25 percent of their energy from alternative sources over 15 to 20 years. A goal of 25 percent in West Virginia would come to 8 million MWh.

One possible portfolio constructed by Risch would have the state get its Tier I energy from wind, wood mill waste and landfill gas. Together these could generate 5.2 million MWh of electricity, the bulk of it coming from wind power. However, it would require more wood mill waste than is currently available in the state.

Making up Tier II would be coalbed methane, small hydroelectric dams and waste coal, which could generate the remaining 2.8 million MWh. However, Risch found no good estimates about how much waste coal is available.

Some of the forms of energy outlined in Risch's example could meet stiff resistance. Vickie Wolfe of the West Virginia Environmental Council said her group would support renovation of existing hydroelectric dams, but not the creation of new dams.

Wolfe and other environmentalists at the hearing also wanted to see solar power play a bigger role in the portfolio, not in the form of solar plants, but in home-and-business systems that produce their own energy and feed any surplus energy into the grid.

West Virginia is only one of two states that don't offer financial incentives to homeowners and businesses that install solar power systems. That puts solar power at a great disadvantage, said Matt Sherald, co-owner of Power in My Back Yard in Thomas.

Sherald said in that his two-and-a-half years in the business, he has seen a lot of enthusiasm for renewable energy.

"What often dampens their enthusiasm is the high cost of a renewable energy system," he said.

A 1.4-kilowatt photovoltaic system tied to the grid would take 120 years to pay for itself at current energy prices, Sherald said.

Coal and other forms of energy already received government subsidies, he said. Among the things the state could do to encourage solar power is offer low-interest, long-term loans for small systems, waive sales taxes on renewable energy equipment and require utilities to reimburse homeowners at triple the retail rate for electricity for any surplus energy they put back into the grid.

The Public Energy Authority took no action on any of the recommendations.

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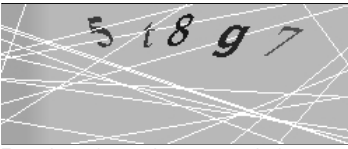
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