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Co-op Opposes Greenhouse Gas Limits

By Joe Crawford SUN Staff Writer

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Half a year after renewable energy was a buzzword in the Jemez Mountains Electric Cooperative Board election, Board members are protesting a limit on the use of fossil fuels in the state.

Board members said at a meeting Jan. 22 that greenhouse gas limits to be considered March 11 by the state Environmental Improvement Board are too strict and would drive up electricity rates for Co-op members. Trustees Kenny Borrego, Elias Coriz, Ron Lovato and Patrick Montoya voiced opposition to the proposed limits, and no Board members spoke up in favor of the limits.

The proposal is the result of a petition from the Santa Fe-based group New Energy Economy, which would set a cap on greenhouse gas emissions in New Mexico. The rule would affect operations such as coal-burning power plants, which provide most of the Co-op's electricity. Trustees said they expected the changes to increase rates.

"I just think that the price issue is the biggest hindrance to this renewable energy stuff," Lovato said.

Lovato and Coriz beat incumbents last summer running as allies on a "New Energy" campaign for local production of renewable energy. Coriz said in July that he and Lovato planned to hold public meetings about how the Co-op should use renewable energy, but those meetings haven't happened yet.

Coriz and Lovato both said Jan. 22 they wanted the Co-op to pursue renewable sources of energy that would cause less pollution, but they said the Co-op is not ready for the proposed cap. Coriz said he worried the public might not believe the Co-op was actually working on finding those new energy sources.

"What they're seeing is we're laying back and reacting to these things instead of being proactive," he said.

Representatives from the New Mexico Rural Electric Cooperative Association and the Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, where the Co-op buys its electricity, spoke to the Board Jan. 22 about the proposed cap on greenhouse gas emissions. Both organizations are parties to a lawsuit filed Jan. 13 seeking to stop the Environmental Improvement Board from considering the proposal.

"This is not an issue that can be done on a state by state basis because air movement does not stop at state borders," Keven Groenewold, executive vice president of the New Mexico Rural Electric Cooperative Association, said.

The petition by New Energy Economy asks the state to cap greenhouse gas emissions at 25 percent below 1990 emissions levels by 2020. That is the limit recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a body established by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization. New Energy Economy Executive Director John Fogarty said his group based its petition on the Panel's recommendations.

But the limit is also significantly tougher than the caps now being considered by the federal government. President Barack Obama submitted a non-binding pledge last week to the United Nations stating the U.S. would reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by approximately 4 percent below 1990 levels by 2020. The federal government has not passed any laws capping greenhouse gas emissions.

Groenwold said any cap specific to New Mexico would hurt the state's economy and force electric utilities to buy from out-of-state coal-burning plants, which would not be affected by New Mexico's law. Lovato asked Groenwold how much the cap might increase electricity costs, but Groenwold said he didn't have an estimate.

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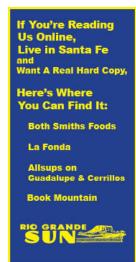
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"Sometimes those numbers are hard to pin down, and if you give them a worst case scenario, you're called an alarmist," Groenwold said.

Fogarty said there's no scientific basis for the claims his group's proposal would increase electricity costs. He said the group is in favor of federal legislation also, but since that doesn't seem likely to happen soon, it is pushing the state to act first.

"We think that New Mexico, with the wealth of renewable energy resources here, if we create a market for renewable energy by putting a cap on fossil fuel energy, we could attract hundreds of millions of dollars in investment in clean energy," he said.

Fogarty pointed to a paper by Michael Livermore, executive director of the Institute for Policy Integrity at the New York University School of Law, which argues for charging companies that emit carbon dioxide.

Livermore claims laws making greenhouse emissions more expensive are the best tools for spurring innovation in renewable energy

"When prices of a commodity are low, there is less incentive to invest in innovation to reduce use of that commodity," Livermore states.

At the end of the presentation Jan. 22, General Manager Ernesto Gonzales asked Tri-State Government Relations Analyst Rhonda Mitchell what the Co-op could do to oppose the proposed rule. Mitchell suggested the trustees write letters to the Environmental Improvement Board and speak against the cap at a March 1 hearing.

"We know that the environmental movement is very organized," she said.



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