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Western states develop energy, ask for help

By Dustin Bleizeffer

DEADWOOD, S.D. -- Western states are on track to surpass a goal of adding 30,000 megawatts of new "clean and diversified" energy generation by 2015, according to a report issued Sunday by the Western Governors' Association.

In fact, western states could add 80,000 megawatts by 2015, but only if they get better cooperation from the federal government.

Several western governors criticized Congress and the Bush administration for not walking the talk on boosting clean energy development.

"Western states are serious about the development of domestic renewable energy. Congress, as usual, is talking about it. We need action," said Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

Western states could produce much more of their rural wind, biomass, solar and coal resources to meet cleaner energy needs if the federal government made good on promises to provide loan guarantees, continues renewable incentives on longer terms and funds advanced coal initiatives, according to the report.

"The potential for the West is astounding," said South Dakota Gov. Mike Rounds. "Our work is not yet done."

The Western Governors' Association began its annual conference Sunday here in Deadwood where the focus of discussion is energy. All western states are involved in the effort, as are several Canadian provinces. Key speakers on the three-day agenda include U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission commissioner Suedeen Kelly.

The Western Governors' Association report highlights progress since the 2004 North American Energy Summit where several aggressive goals were set, including the creation of 30,000 of clean and diversified energy generation by 2015, and a 20 percent increase in energy efficiency by 2020.

Western states added 1,986 megawatts of clean energy generation in 2005, and 2,092 megawatts in 2006, according to the report, "Clean Energy, a Strong Economy and a Healthy Environment." Of all new power generation in the region, 25 percent was categorized as "clean and diversified," consisting of wind, geothermal, biomass and solar.

Wind accounted for 93 percent of clean energy additions, according to the report. While no advanced coal generation has come online, the report referred to a total of 16,674 megawatts of expressed interest among potential developers.

Seven of the top 10 wind producing states are in the West. Despite recent success of adding wind generation in recent years, developers and the investment community remain somewhat shy because a federal tax incentive for wind development has been continued in only 2-year increments.

Western governors want the federal government to commit to 10-year programs for such incentives.

Rounds said that would send a signal to the public - and to investors - that renewable energy development is a trend that will continue.

Several western governors also complained that the Bush administration has leased vast amounts of acres for oil and natural gas development in key wildlife habitats, yet it relies on the states to come up with solutions to conserve declining species such as the sage grouse.

"Frankly, we'd be pleased if the feds weren't so fired up on oil and gas in West," said Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal.

Gov. Schweitzer agreed that federal officials need to work more closely with the vision of western states to diversify domestic energy supplies while maintaining wildlife habitat.

"How about talking to the governors about where they lease," Schweitzer said.

The annual meeting continues today and Tuesday. Stakeholders will discuss strategies for expanding the Western electrical grid, sequestering carbon dioxide and launching policies that foster renewable energy development and advanced coal technologies.