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VIRGINIA CONSIDERS RENEWABLE POWER SOURCES

Support for RPS Legislation Is a Stand for Clean Energy . . .

By JIM MADDEN

TIMES DISPATCH GUEST COLUMNIST

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Virginia has an important choice to make, but it's a no-brainer. The Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) bill sponsored by Sen. Mary Margaret Whipple would require that all retail electric utilities in Virginia obtain 12 percent of their electricity from renewable sources -- such as wind, solar, and biomass -- by 2020. It would also require these utilities to enact energy efficiency programs to save an additional 5 percent of electric usage by 2020. These limits are attainable and implementing them is unlikely to increase our electric rates.

If the General Assembly passes this bill, Virginia would join 23 other states in taking a stand in support of clean energy. Every megawatt-hour of clean energy produced removes the need to generate a megawatt-hour of electricity from other sources, such as coal and natural gas.

Today, coal-fueled power plants generate over 50 percent of our nation's electricity and 50 percent of our electricity here in Virginia. These coal plants are the largest industrial source of air pollution in the nation. They are responsible for more than 30,000 premature deaths annually nationwide and more than 1,000 here in Virginia, according to studies published by Harvard University and the American Cancer Society. Aside from the direct health effects, the power industry generates 37 percent of all man-made CO2 emissions, according to the International Energy Agency, making it a frontrunner in the global-warming bad-guy contest. Clearly, there are significant problems with the way we generate electricity today.

HOWEVER, even clean energy technologies have issues. Because of its low cost, wind power would likely be the leading renewable energy technology used to meet the RPS requirements. The ongoing debate over the Highland County wind farm illustrates the fact that no energy source is perfect. As a wind farm developer and supporter of residential and "small wind" in Virginia, I am acutely aware of residents' concerns about local issues of noise, avian and bat mortality, and visual impacts related to wind projects. The wind industry works hard to mitigate these risks and continues to make progress with newer technologies, but every energy source has its costs and not all of them are financial costs.

Even so, the potential benefits of promoting wind energy development in Virginia are substantial. Wind farms could bring thousands of new jobs and millions of dollars in property taxes annually to struggling counties in Southwest Virginia. Wind energy also has very stable and predictable costs, because there is no fuel to burn. It also improves our energy security, because it is a local resource. Put another way: It is our wind -- why waste it?

DESPITE THESE benefits, some electric utilities and the Virginia Manufacturers Association oppose the RPS bill, fearing that it would raise electric rates. In fact, there is no evidence to support this from other states and evidence to the contrary from both California and Texas, where utility customers who have chosen wind energy instead of fossil fuel sources have benefited from savings of \$5 to \$10 per month.

In the end, however, the proposed RPS bill is not about coal versus wind power. We cannot forget that the coal industry has been a source of economic growth throughout our history and is still a major employer here. Virginia is a coal state and for the foreseeable future coal will continue to

"keep the lights on" for all of us. Wind power and other renewable sources cannot supply the bulk of our energy needs.

We simply need to decide whether the status quo is good enough or whether the health and environmental impacts of fossil fuel generation justify carving out 12 percent of our future electric needs to be supplied by renewable sources.

Again, I think this decision a no-brainer. I hope the General Assembly will agree and will pass Sen. Whipple's bill.

Jim Madden is the president of Chesapeake Renewable Energy, LLC, in Richmond.

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