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Gov: Mich. is behind in green jobs race

Granholm says Mich. behind times, must use more renewable energy that will create jobs.

Mark Hornbeck / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Gov. Jennifer Granholm has returned from a summit with the nation's governors saying she's convinced Michigan is in the "backwater" of renewable energy and must pass a law by next month requiring the state to meet some of its electricity needs with wind power and other green sources.

She said the state will lose out on wind turbine manufacturing plants and other job-creating ventures without the law, which would mandate that the state generate 10 percent of its electric power from renewable sources by 2015. The state gets 3.5 percent of its electricity from these alternative power sources.

"We need to get this done and get it done now this is the fastest way we can create jobs," said Granholm, who came back Monday night from the National Governors Association winter meeting in Washington, D.C., where state chiefs talked about alternative energy and other issues.

"This ought to be done in March. If not, something is wrong," Granholm added, saying she's encouraged by progress on the issue in the Legislature.

Twenty-five states require as much as a quarter of their electricity needs to be met by wind, solar, biomass and other renewable sources by a certain date, and three others have voluntary goals. Michigan is behind those states in competing for jobs in the emerging renewable energy industry, Granholm said.

"Michigan is in the backwater," she said.

"It's got to be a mandate. Otherwise it's just too soft," the governor said when asked whether she'd accept a voluntary plan for increasing use of renewable energy.

Skip Pruss, the governor's renewable energy czar, said a multinational wind turbine-building company is on the verge of making a decision on where to build five plants. He said Michigan doesn't stand a chance to attract any of those factories without alternative power standards. Michigan could attract more than 30,000 jobs by becoming a major player in renewable energy, Pruss said.

It won't be easy to push a renewable energy bill through the Legislature in a few weeks. Some key Senate Republicans aren't convinced the state needs to have alternative energy mandates. Also, the standards are tangled up in the Legislature with a so called electric-choice bill to limit the share of customers that can move from one of the major utilities to a competitor.

"We're trying to use a deliberative process. This is an extraordinarily complex arena," said Sen. Bruce Patterson, R-Canton, who chairs the Senate Energy Policy and Public Utilities Committee.

"We're not purposely dragging this out. There's a lot of moving pieces in this thing."

Detroit Edison and Consumers Energy say they'll invest \$6 billion in renewable sources, mostly wind power, if the electric-choice law is repealed or amended to their liking.

Utility competitors and consumer groups oppose that part of the package, saying it would return a

monopoly to the utilities and drive up electric rates.

Direct Energy, a Houston-based energy company that wants to enter the Michigan market, opposes legislation that would reregulate utilities here. It favors three Senate bills that would encourage competition for residential customers, set up a competitive bidding process for meeting Michigan's future energy needs and give consumers monetary credits for any new generation plant fees they pay.


"The debate, so far, is focused on the wrong thing," said Tanya Paslawski, Direct Energy's government and regulatory affairs manager. "It should be focused on how to make the market best for customers."

Another part of the plan being pushed by Granholm would create incentives for the two major utilities to reduce energy consumption in the state.

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