

Some lawmakers oppose green legislation over energy bill hikes

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Reducing America's dependence on foreign oil has been stated as a top priority of President Barack Obama.

But several area state representatives say North Carolina already took a strong step toward encouraging renewable energy two years ago. They worry that a more stringent federal push could spur higher gas prices and electricity rates — burdens their constituents can't endure when unemployment is so high.

N.C. Rep. Pearl Burris-Floyd, who represents portions of Gaston and Cleveland counties, joined one Democrat and four other Republican state legislators in sending a letter to U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan last week. They voiced their opposition to any federally mandated increase to the renewable energy standards passed by the N.C. General Assembly in 2007.

"Fifteen to 16 percent of the people in my district don't even have jobs," said Burris-Floyd. "Why go ahead and hurt those people more? It's sort of like kicking them when they're down."

Measures in place

The 2007 bill sets a standard of generating 3 percent of the state's electrical needs from sources such as wind, hydro power, solar power, hydrogen and biomass by 2012. The percentage would increase every three years until it reached 12.5 percent in 2012.

North Carolina was the first state in the southeast to set such standards, working with environmental groups, energy producers and others to pass the law, Burris-Floyd said.

Caitlyn Legacki, Hagan's North Carolina press secretary, said Hagan supported that bill when she was a state senator in 2007. At the federal level, plans to implement further standards are on hold, she said.

"A cap and trade measure passed the House recently, but the Senate has yet to take up a bill," Legacki wrote in an e-mail.

Cost concerns

Burris-Floyd's supporters on the issue include Reps. Bruce Goforth, D-Buncombe, Mitch Gillespie, R-McDowell, Linda Johnson, R-Cabarrus, Carolyn Justus, R-Henderson, and Roger West, R-Cherokee.

In their letter to Hagan, they said they are troubled that the cap and trade provisions and the president's budget directives to tax the oil and gas industry would drive up the cost of electricity. Economists have estimated that costs could rise as much as 15 percent, they said.

Their letter asserts that as a 2008 presidential candidate, Obama told the San Francisco

Chronicle that “Under my cap and trade plan, electricity rates would necessarily skyrocket.” The letter also maintains that President Obama’s newly appointed energy secretary, Steven Chu, told the Wall Street Journal in September that “We have to figure out how to boost the price of gasoline to the levels in Europe.”

Burris-Floyd said she and her colleagues are supportive of alternative fuel sources, but the state’s 12.5 percent standard is aggressive enough for North Carolina. Many residents here are still reeling from the loss of manufacturing jobs, she said.

“It’s the wrong time to add this burden of higher energy costs on our neighbors,” she said.

Balancing interests

Legacki said Sen. Hagan will work with her colleagues to protect North Carolina jobs and make sure burdensome costs are not passed on to consumers.

“She will be working to ensure the legislation creates green jobs and moves America toward energy independence, reducing our dependence on foreign oil,” Legacki said in her e-mail. “The bill must also balance concerns about the long-term impact of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases on the environment.”

Burris-Floyd believes any further federal intervention will be more costly for everyone.

“The voice of the people is clear,” she said. “They want Sen. Hagan to hold the line on the renewable energy standards.”

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