'You Are my Sunshine, my Only Sunshine'

SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

The debate over whether New Mexico should be doing more in pursuit of clean energy and pollution regulation went beyond the usual flurry of petitions and lawsuits Wednesday when environmentalists showed up at Gov. Susana Martinez's office dressed in solar panel costumes.

Singing to the tune of "You are My Sunshine," the activists urged the governor to tap into the state's potential for developing more renewable energy.

The demonstration, the second in as many days, comes as state regulators are taking testimony on whether New Mexico should repeal regulations aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions from coal-fired power plants and other large polluters.

Critics of the regulations said the debate comes down to a policy question of how much economic pain New Mexico should endure to achieve what they describe as insignificant environmental benefits.

Proponents argue the environmental and public health implications of doing nothing could end up costing New Mexico more in the future.

"The protest actions are trying to highlight the connections between the effects of climatic change and the inability of government to address and mitigate the deepening of those changes," said Mariel Nanasi, executive director of New Energy Economy, one of the groups that organized the demonstrations.

The governor did not meet with the activists Wednesday, but WildEarth Guardians' Jeremy Nichols said the effort to publicize the debate beyond courtrooms and regulatory hearings would continue.

On Tuesday, the activists outlined their bodies with chalk on the sidewalks in front of PNM's headquarters in Albuquerque. They also wrapped the utility's sign with crime scene tape.

The utility believes New Mexicans understand the need to protect the environment, but not at the cost of an affordable and reliable supply of electricity, PNM spokesman Don Brown said.

"While props and costumes may create a visual impact, they do nothing to help our state move forward on these important issues," Brown said in a statement.

Just as the environmental groups have been encouraging their members to send letters to state officials and testify before the Environmental Improvement Board, critics have also been organizing.

"We encourage those New Mexicans who support a balanced approach to energy issues to get involved. Our state has an enormous amount at stake," Brown said.

Even Martinez, a vocal opponent of the state's greenhouse gas regulations, urged people gathered at a recent utility shareholders luncheon to speak up.

During the first day of testimony before the Environmental Improvement Board, officials with the state Environment Department, PNM, Xcel Energy and Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association Inc. shared estimates of what the carbon regulations could cost. Those figures ranged from $840 million over 20 years for PNM customers to a $1.6 billion reduction in the state's economic output through 2030.

Charles Pinson, president of the board of directors of the New Mexico Rural Electric Cooperative Association, delivered to regulators more than 16,900 petition signatures in favor of repealing the emissions regulations. He said the signatures, gathered over the course of two months, should serve as a message to regulators.

Attorneys on both sides of the debate have acknowledged that more appeals and petitions are likely no matter what the Environmental Improvement Board decides. Still, the environmentalists said they're hopeful "real discussions" about the state's energy future will come from all of the wrangling.

"This isn't about lawsuits and petitions and cap-and-trade schemes," Nichols said. "It's about clean energy and the more we can make it about clean energy and really show people the promise and potential here in New Mexico, then we're getting somewhere."

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