

# Undersea Cable Bill Gets Last Chance in Senate

TREENA SHAPIRO, Associated Press

A proposal to connect Oahu and neighboring island power grids is getting a jump start.

The state House has already approved a bill that would allow Hawaii to begin establishing regulations so planning and implementation of an undersea cable can move forward. Sen. Mike Gabbard, chairman of the Energy and Environment Committee, asked his colleagues to consider the House draft Thursday, the last day of the 2012 legislative session.

Hawaii's geographic isolation prevents sharing electricity with other states, as seen on the mainland. It also means higher costs for fuel. According to the state Energy Office, Hawaii's electricity prices — roughly \$200 a month per household — are three times higher than the national average.

An interisland high-voltage electric transmission cable system could change that by linking power sources on different islands.

The result would increase the reliability of power statewide and also stabilize costs, according to Gov. Neil Abercrombie, whose administration proposed the measure, Senate Bill 2785.

The governor's press secretary said Wednesday that Abercrombie would stand behind remarks from his State of the State Address in January: "There is no legislation more critical to our future," he said then.

At this stage, the Legislature is not endorsing a specific plan. Senate approval would allow the state to consider different proposals for sharing power between Oahu — where fossil fuel is cheapest — and the neighboring islands, which have more room for renewable power plants.

Jeffrey Ono, executive director of the state Division of Consumer Advocacy, spoke in support of the measure before lawmakers in February.

He explained that the cable could allow the counties' separate energy grids to carry less spinning reserves if power was shared across the state. Under the current structure, each county has to keep generators running in case demand increases or there's a power outage.

Through the cable, a problem on one island could be solved with power from another, Ono noted.

"The undersea transmission cable bill is an important step in spurring more renewable energy generation projects, including geothermal, providing greater

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energy reliability with interconnected island grids, and bring statewide uniformity in electricity rates," he said.

Proponents of the plan see it as a way to share geothermal energy from the Big Island, or power from wind farms on Maui, for example. That can't happen without an undersea cable.

Jeff Mikulina, executive director of the Blue Planet Foundation, circulated an open letter supporting the bill to senators Wednesday.

"Hawaii's islands have varying amounts of technologically acquirable renewable energy resources and an uneven distribution of electricity demand based on population and economic activity," he said.

"Maui, for example, has surplus wind energy at night, while Oahu has an expanding fleet of electric vehicles that could put that energy to work," Mikulina said.

Undersea cable systems are used to transmit electricity in several locations throughout the world, including New York and Connecticut, Sweden, Australia and the Netherlands.

Telecommunications cables already link the Hawaiian islands' telephone and data sources.

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