

Neb. public power groups oppose solar gardens bill

ALISSA SKELTON - Associated Press - Associated Press

Utility officials warned lawmakers on Tuesday that a plan for so-called community solar gardens could increase energy costs in Nebraska, but environmentalists said the proposal would make it easier for residents to use solar power to provide electricity to their homes.

The proposal being considered by the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee would allow residents to join a community solar garden, similar to a co-op, in exchange for a credit on their electric bills.

Individuals, businesses or nonprofits could set up solar panels in an empty field or on the roof of a building, such as a church or school, and then others could purchase shares rather than spending money to install solar panels at their own homes or businesses. Such gardens would be allowed to generate up to two megawatts of power that would contribute to the electricity already provided by a local utility.

The bill's sponsor, Lincoln Sen. Amanda McGill, said community gardens in Colorado inspired the plan, which has the support of environmental groups including the Nebraska Sierra Club and the Nebraska Wildlife Federation. NWF energy director John Atkeison noted that solar power has become much more affordable as technology evolved.

"As utility rates rise and the cost of the solar hardware falls, we can expect more competitiveness and much, much more solar power," he said.

Plus, McGill added, generating home-grown energy would keep more of energy dollars in Nebraska.

The Nebraska Power Association, Lincoln Electric System and other public power groups said that while they support expanding solar energy and renewable resources, they oppose the legislation. NPA lobbyist Kristen Gottschalk said the program contradicts the 2009 net metering law, which was intended as a safeguard for consumers using renewable energy.

"While we certainly understand the interest in creating solar gardens and allowing those energy consumers that would like to invest in renewable energy the opportunity to do so, the proposed legislation is not the best way to accomplish that goal," Gottschalk said.

Net metering allows a customer that generates renewable energy to fall back on the electric company in instances when the renewable energy source isn't generating

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enough power.

Current law says net metering is not intended to offset or provide credits for electricity consumption at another location controlled by the customer-generator, Gottschalk said. A solar garden acts as a customer-generator because it allows customers to buy shares in the garden to offset their utility bills, Gottschalk argued.

Scott Benson of Lincoln Electric Systems said he also doesn't like including solar gardens in the net metering program because it would complicate the billing system and could increase costs for other customers.

He said LES is doing a study of its own on solar energy, and therefore doesn't think the bill is necessary. He added that the two megawatts of power the legislation would allow for the community garden was far too large. He suggested 100 kilowatts per solar garden.

KBR Rural Public Power District general manager Rich Walters said in a letter to the committee that net metering customers dodge their responsibility to help pay for the electric facilities, leaving ratepayers to pay the deficit.

"Increasing the threshold will only allow those subsidies to increase, which is unreasonable and unfair," he wrote. "I just feel they should pay their own way and stop relying on the state and federal taxpayer along with the Nebraska ratepayer, to subsidize them so their projects can become 'feasible.'"

McGill later said she would work with the power companies on the amount of power such gardens should be allowed to generate.

"I am very interested in working over the next few months or maybe into next session on how we can push forward so all communities can make this a realization," McGill said.

Omaha Sen. Rick Kolowski, a member of the Natural Resources Committee, questioned why Nebraska is always behind the renewable energy curve. He said it's about time Nebraska starts using renewable energy.

"It is time to really start thinking deeply about this," he said. "How long must we wait before we really get the action and the fortitude to do something to positive and constructively make a difference?"

Lawmakers have not decided if or when they will consider moving the bill to the floor for debate.

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The bill is LB557.

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