NY Moves Toward Adopting Wind, Other Green Energy

MICHAEL HILL - Associated Press - Associated Press

A new study says New York could get the power it needs from wind, water and sunlight by 2030 with a concerted push, though the state's decade-long effort to significantly boost green energy shows how challenging that could be.

The study, led by researchers from Stanford and Cornell universities, provides a theoretical road map to how New Yorkers could rely on renewable energy within 17 years. It would require massive investments in wind turbines, solar panels and more from the windy shores off Long Island to sun-exposed rooftops upstate.

"It's doable," said co-author Robert Howarth, a Cornell professor of ecology and environmental biology. "It's way outside of the realm of what most people are talking about ... But I think people have been too pessimistic about what can be done."

In fact, New York has been committed to significantly increasing green energy production for the past nine years under its renewable portfolio standard, which is funded by a surcharge of less than a dollar on monthly electricity bills. Then-Gov. George Pataki began the program in 2004 with the goal of New York relying on renewable resources for a quarter of its electricity by 2013.

That goal, tweaked three years ago, is now for the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to support the production of about 10.4 million megawatt-hours of energy from hydro, wind, solar, biomass and landfill gas annually by 2015. The authority reported this week that it was 46 percent of the way to the goal at the end of last year.

The goal could lead to roughly 30 percent renewables by 2015, once clean-energy purchases by consumers and resources added by the Long Island Power Authority are factored in.

With two years to go, clean energy advocates say it will be difficult for New York to hit the 2015 renewable target. But they believe the larger point is that New York is making progress.

"To me, the long-term commitment to continue to invest in resources is more important than the particular target you set," said Valerie Strauss, interim executive director of the Alliance for Clean Energy New York, a group that represents renewable energy interests.

Looking at energy generated in New York, which excludes imported power that can be used for the energy authority's targets, about 20 percent came from hydro,

which includes decades-old projects along the Niagara and St. Lawrence rivers. Wind accounted for 2 percent, and other renewable sources accounted for another 2 percent, according to 2011 figures from the operators of the state's power grid.

"Exclusive of hydropower, the state has developed more renewable energy than any other state in the Northeast," said authority spokeswoman Kate Muller. "Including hydropower, New York's renewable energy capacity is comparable to the entire renewable energy capacity of the other eight states in the Northeast."

New York has made a lot of progress in harnessing wind power, jumping from 48 megawatts of wind capacity in 2004 to more than 1,600 megawatts now, including large-scale development on the windy Tug Hill Plateau east of Lake Ontario.

The university researchers say half of the state's renewable power in 2030 could come from wind, mostly from 12,700 off-shore turbines. But wind power demonstrates some of the challenges of swapping out fossil fuels for green energy.

Industry watchers say wind development slowed down when the economy soured and natural gas prices dropped. There's also uncertainty over the future of a federal tax credit for wind installations.

Offshore wind farms can be particularly costly and controversial. The New York Power Authority in 2011 nixed a plan to put up to 150 turbines offshore between Buffalo and Chautauqua County, citing costs. The authority is now working with downstate power providers to explore the feasibility of wind turbines off the shore of Long Island.

Clean energy advocates point out the switchover to renewables often has less to do with available technology and more to do with market forces and political choices.

"It depends on the political will we can muster and our ability to invest in these resources," said Katherine Kennedy, of Natural Resources Defense Council.

Strauss said an important step would be for the state to extend its renewable program beyond 2015. The state will consider the program's future as part of a review this year.

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