

Western governors consider alternative energy, climate change

Moving the megawatts

By MATT GOURAS - Associated Press writer | Posted: Tuesday, June 29, 2010

WHITEFISH, Mont. -- New transmission lines are critical to developing the alternative electricity production needed to meet demand in the coming years, governors of states in the West said Monday.

The need for new energy development and dangers of climate change topped the agenda at the annual meeting of the Western Governors Association, where participants recognized that more renewable energy is a priority that will require considerable private investment.

About half of the governors in the West, including Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal, are participating in the event.

The governors want to find a way to fast-track the construction of expensive, lengthy transmission lines to carry wind and solar power from rural to large urban areas.

But a conflict exists over the placement of such lines. Environmentalists don't want the lines dissecting national forests, and many private landowners are also resistant.

Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who chairs the association, said without new lines there won't be much more new energy development. The lines must be placed on federal public land that dominates much of the region, and traditional delays in permits and other disputes must end, he said.

"We don't develop any of the alternative sources until you get transmission," said Schweitzer, a Democrat. "You can't put electricity in a bottle and send it down the river."

Schweitzer said a new transmission line is needed to connect wind power fields on the Montana plains with those near the Columbia River in Washington. The wind usually is blowing in at least one of the places, creating what could be an unusually steady source of wind power, he said.

Such a line could lead to investments in wind-heavy places where new projects face challenges getting their energy to market, officials said.

"If we can't get it anywhere, what good does it do?" said Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire, a Democrat.

A panel of experts advised the governors to set low carbon standards for electricity as a way to spur technology development, rather than simply increasing the cost of traditional energy in hopes of making green power competitive.

Vinod Khosla, a businessman involved in alternative energy investment, said the markets will find solutions to produce cheaper, greener energy without government mandates.

"Environmentalists are pretty good at finding problems, but they are pretty terrible at funding solutions," he said.

Schweitzer resisted the notion that agencies could reduce regulation but said there could be smarter ways to set rules that don't impede energy development.

"We have to have common-sense regulation. We are not going to have a race to the bottom in the West," Schweitzer said.

A consensus report from the bipartisan governors group said climate change poses many problems for the region, including a degradation in air and water quality along with a reduction in plant and animal species that could hurt industries such as tourism and agriculture.

A separate report by the group charted a "roadmap" to help energy developers navigate local, state, regional and federal issues.

The association also elected Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, a Republican, as its new chairman. Gregoire takes over from Otter as vice chairman.