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[Back](#)

Editorial: Renewable energy bill a positive step

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Plenty of politicians talk about reducing the country's dependency on fossil fuels, but Wisconsin lawmakers are doing something about it.

In a rare display of bipartisanship, the Wisconsin Senate voted 32-1 last week to advance to the Assembly a bill that would allow the state to diversify its energy supply and have alternate energy available for periods of high demand.

Sponsored primarily by two local lawmakers — Sen. Rob Cowles, R-Allouez, and Rep. Phil Montgomery, R-Ashwaubenon — Senate Bill 459 would reduce Wisconsin's dependency on out-of-state sources of energy. That's because the state would develop its own sources of renewable energy, such as wind power and solar, that would produce indefinitely without depletion.

Cowles told Press-Gazette Madison Bureau Chief Karen Lincoln Michel that the bill would allow the state to diversify its supply and have alternative energy on hand when demand was high.

"For example, if we had the 10 percent renewables in place right now and the big natural gas price increase had come on like it did," Cowles said, "we could have buffered a piece of that with the alternative energy because you wouldn't be relying so much on the natural gas."

That's reason enough for the Assembly to approve the bill and for Gov. Jim Doyle to sign it. But the legislation has other advantages as well.

Among them, expanding renewable energy to 10 percent of total energy use by 2015, as the bill would do, would keep money circulating in the state that otherwise would be spent on out-of-state fuel. It would provide opportunities for job growth and economic benefits for rural communities. And it would prevent the Legislature and governor from raiding the Focus on Energy fund to help balance the state budget, as they have done in the past. That fund, partially supported by ratepayers, encourages energy conservation and efficiency and renewable energy programs.

Passage of the bill wouldn't free Wisconsin of its dependency on the national energy market, but it would be a significant step in the right direction.

Issue

Renewable energy bill

Our view

The Cowles-Montgomery legislation is a significant step toward reducing Wisconsin's dependency on out-of-state oil, coal and natural gas