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California Assembly OKs increased renewable energy requirement

The mandate, now headed for governor's desk, would require utilities to increase renewable energy sources to 33% by 2020.

By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times

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A mandate that California utilities increase their use of renewable energy sailed through the state Assembly on Tuesday and is headed for the governor's desk.

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Environmental groups say the legislation is the most ambitious of its kind in the country. It would require the state's electricity companies to provide 33% of power from renewable resources by the year 2020. State law now sets a 20% goal.

Supporters made their case by invoking the nuclear plant problems in Japan and conflict in the oil-rich Middle East, as well as the struggling California economy: Environmentalists have said the mandate could create 100,000 jobs.

The bill aims to lessen dependence on coal and natural gas in favor of wind, solar and geothermal energy. It would also protect ratepayers from large new costs, and "provides flexibility to utilities," argued Assemblyman Wesley Chesbro (D-Arcata).

Safeguards in the bill include a cap on the cost to utilities of meeting the 33% goal and a provision to delay the mandate if sufficient clean power is unavailable, Chesbro said.

But several Republican lawmakers including Assemblyman Tim Donnelly of San Bernardino said they were not convinced that the measure would protect electricity customers from a rate increase, which a state agency once estimated could be 7%.

"All we're going to do is make electricity more expensive, make us less competitive with other states and, if you're a manufacturing company looking to bring jobs to California, you are going to be taking a hard look at other places because of this bill," Donnelly said.

The measure, previously passed by the Senate, received approval from the Assembly on a 55-19 vote.

Gov. Jerry Brown has not taken a position on the bill but campaigned last year in favor of increasing the renewable energy mandate.

If he signs the bill, it would give the force of law to a goal first set by then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger two years ago and satisfy the hopes of green power entrepreneurs, who lobbied heavily for an expanded mandate.

"This is going to stimulate the renewable energy industry in California and the West," said Dan Kalb, California policy manager of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

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