

Environmental groups warn against legislation

By Sam Schaefer
Staff Writer

Several environmental advocacy groups are urging Gov. Bev Perdue to veto bills they say would harm N.C.'s environment and hamper state agencies' ability to protect it.

The bills include "Energy Jobs Act" and "Regulatory Reform Act." Perdue must take action on them by tonight, or let them become law.

The jobs act directs Perdue to work with nearby states along the coast to begin natural gas exploration in preparation for offshore drilling.

The reform act prohibits state environmental agencies from implementing stricter standards than what is specified in federal law, except in cases of a threat to public health or a court order.

In a letter to Perdue, leaders of state environmental groups said the most recent legislative session represented a "relentless assault on the environment."

"(The) bills... reverse North Carolina's unique commitment to the environment that has made the state one of the best places in the country to live and do business," the letter said.

Elizabeth Ouzts, state director of Environment North Carolina and one of the signatories of the letter, said the jobs act will actually eliminate more jobs than it creates if offshore drilling results in an environmental disaster.

"(The) bills... reverse North Carolina's unique commitment to the environment."

Letter to Gov. Bev Perdue,
Directors of N.C. environmental groups

"Our coasts are much more valuable clean than they are dirty," she said.

Ouzts said the state should focus on creating jobs by supporting renewable energy sources such as wind and solar.

"That's where we have the most potential to create homegrown energy that protects the environment and also creates the jobs that we need," she said.

But Sen. Harry Brown, R-Jones, a primary sponsor of both bills, said the state will lose opportunities for job growth and increased revenue if it does not pursue offshore drilling.

The jobs act claims that states such as South Carolina and Virginia have already moved forward on offshore drilling, and that a potential disaster would inevitably affect the North Carolina coast whether the state engages in drilling or not.

Brown said he thinks the risk for environmental disaster is low.

"There have been a lot of lessons learned in exploring off the coast," he said. "I feel pretty confident that we'd be very, very careful and make sure all the safeguards that we could put in place would be there."

But Ouzts and other environ-

mental advocates say a 12.3 percent cut in the state budget for the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources will impede the agency's ability to properly regulate procedures such as offshore drilling. And if the reform act becomes law, the kind of regulations in place won't be strong enough, Ouzts said.

"The... reform bill is really an attempt to stop all new environmental legislation and also initiates a process of undoing rules that are already on the books that protect our air and our water," she said.

"State regulators should have the ability, if they are allowed by statute, to go ahead and enact stronger protections for North Carolina's unique environment."

Brown said the bill aims to remove unnecessary bureaucratic impediments for businesses rather than damage the environment. "If you talk to any business — especially on the coast where I live — if you talk to anyone that has tried to do any kind of project, it has gotten so burdensome that people are to the point where they won't even do the projects anymore," he said.

Contact the State & National Editor at state@dailytarheel.com.

NC sees rapid growth in renewable energy industry

By Stirling Little
Staff Writer

Renewable energy has emerged as a growing industry in the state, according to a recent report by the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association.

The report identified more than 1,800 renewable energy projects in the state this year.

About 1,100 firms were involved with renewable energy activities in 2010, according to the association.

Erik Lensch, president of Argand Energy Solutions, a solar energy company based in Charlotte, said his company has been a part of the industry's recent expansion.

"We have doubled (in size) every year since 2008," he said. "We just kicked off a \$3 million project this week, our largest ever."

Paul Copleman, communications manager at Iberdrola Renewables, an energy company whose American subsidiary is based in Portland, Ore., said his company is in the process of receiving state approval for construction of a wind farm project called Desert Wind.

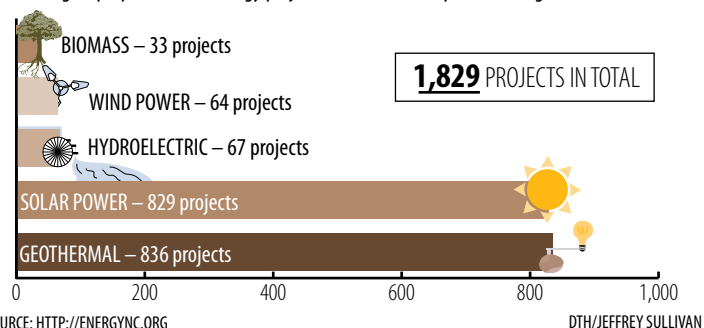
Copleman said the 300-megawatt Desert Wind project would represent an investment of at least \$600 million, making it the largest utility-scale wind power project in the state's history.

Legislators and industry leaders have attributed growth to a 2007 law that established renewable energy standards.

The law requires electric power

NC RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECTS

Energy firms have increased activity in recent months, spearheading projects for biomass, geothermal, hydroelectric, solar and wind sources. Construction of a wind farm in eastern N.C., the largest proposed clean energy project in the state, is expected to begin in 2012.



SOURCE: [HTTP://ENERGY.NC.ORG](http://energy.nc.org)

suppliers in the state to generate a prescribed amount of electricity from renewable sources.

Rep. Mike Hager, R-Cleveland, said the state has played an active role in the growth of renewable energy.

"Federal funds were not the major driving force behind most of these projects," he said. "The growth almost all happened after 2007, when we passed (the renewable energy law)."

Though the state's unemployment rate remains stubbornly high at 9.7 percent, industry leaders say they are boosting the state's economy by promoting job creation.

The association estimated that the renewable energy industry employed about 12,500 workers in the state in 2010.

"I've got 20 guys on a roof north of Durham this morning," Lensch said. "These kind of guys come straight out of Appalachian (State University). These jobs would have gone out of state without solar

suppliers in North Carolina." But Hager said the higher cost of clean energy is a concern for the state's consumers.

"Renewables are a great asset, but what we have to make sure of is to keep energy prices down and to keep our energy income reliable."

Rep. Pat McElraft, R-Carteret, said in an email that the state must pursue all potential energy sources to keep costs low for state residents.

"I am definitely an advocate for becoming energy independent in the United States and I think North Carolina can play a big part in obtaining that goal," she said.

Copleman said only economically viable projects receive approval from N.C.'s regulators.

"The wind has to blow long and hard if it's going to happen," he said.

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