

January 11, 2008

Groups release environmental goals

By Tom Searls
Staff writer

West Virginia must begin addressing energy issues in a non-carbon way, members of the state's environmental community said Thursday.

"West Virginia is at a crossroads," said Jim Kotcon of the state Sierra Club.

He and members of the West Virginia Environmental Council warned that basing the state's energy policy on coal is not going to help clean the environment until there can be carbon sequestration. That process is expected to take at least another 10 years of research, said Don Garvin, the council's lead lobbyist.

A day after Gov. Joe Manchin touted continued growth of coal-based energy in his State of the State address, the environmental council responded by releasing its own "West Virginia Citizens' Energy Plan."

During a Capitol news conference, Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, said she would introduce five pieces of legislation to further the clean energy cause.

"Even our president now admits global warming is a reality," Fleischauer said.

The top priority will be a renewable energy portfolio, which Vickie Wolfe, lobbyist for the council, said many other states already have. The idea, she said, is to reduce greenhouse gases, promote jobs and reduce the nation's dependency on foreign oil.

"We're very glad the governor is talking about these issues," Fleischauer said.

However, he's speaking a slightly different language. Manchin has called for construction of as many as five coal liquefaction facilities. The environmentalists say making coal into a liquid form does not make coal burn any cleaner. In fact, Wolfe said gasoline- and diesel-powered vehicles create fewer problems.

The renewable energy portfolio would set targets for energy reduction. "It shouldn't just be a fad every 10 years or so when gas prices go up," Fleischauer said.

Another legislative priority will be to establish a state global warming commission. "Now is late, but we need to start," she said.

Basing vehicle registration costs on the amount of fuel an automobile consumes is another goal.

"We think that makes a lot more sense than having it based on [the vehicle's] value," Wolfe said.

In their seven-page plan, environmentalists said the state should aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote sustainable businesses, reduce dependence on foreign oil and conserve energy resources and water.

During his Wednesday night speech, Manchin promoted energy conservation, encouraging residents to use efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs and turn out lights when they leave a room. The governor also said state government needs to do better, and called for state agencies to reduce energy consumption by 10 percent this year.

However, Manchin's energy plan focuses on the governor's "energy independence goal," and the idea of replacing large portions of the state's petroleum use with liquid coal.

While opposing the liquid coal plants, environmentalists agree with Manchin on one proposal: promoting the installation of renewable energy plants on strip-mine sites. Environmentalists said those facilities should not just become a reason for more mountaintop removal mining.

"It's a fabulous idea to see if the hundreds of thousands of acres of West Virginia already laid to waste by mountaintop removal can be used for projects such as concentrated solar energy plants — as long as such plans are never used as an excuse to destroy even more mountains and streams," said Vivian Stockman of the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition.

Fleischauer also wants to pass legislation placing deposits on bottles. The proposal has been kicked around by lawmakers for several years, seeming to gain a little more support with each new session.

"We did it before," Fleischauer said, recalling the days when glass pop bottles and milk jugs were turned in at grocery stores to redeem the deposit. "We can do it again. It's not that hard."

Another bill she intends to champion this session would force the state to get on the cutting edge of building environmentally friendly structures.

At the same time, the group wants to set targets for energy reduction and give tax breaks to those who do such things as put up solar panels and use solar-heated hot-water tanks.

No one in attendance seemed to believe all the proposals could become law, but Fleischauer believes progress can be made.

"I think we can do things positively," she said, "and that's what we're working on."

The environmental council's plan is available online at www.wvecouncil.org.

Staff writer Ken Ward Jr. contributed to this report. To contact staff writer Tom Searls, use e-mail or call 348-5198.
