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Will Owens take up clean-energy cry?

Governor has not said whether he'll support N.M. proposal for West

By Gargi Chakrabarty, Rocky Mountain News
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ALBUQUERQUE - It is unclear whether Colorado Gov. Bill Owens will follow up on New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson's proposal for clean energy development when Owens takes over as chairman of the Western Governors' Association in June.

As yet, he isn't saying.

Richardson, a former energy secretary in the Clinton administration, and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger have taken the lead in urging Western states to develop at least 30,000 megawatts of clean energy by 2015. The two jointly signed a letter of their commitment, which was released Wednesday at the WGA-sponsored North American Energy Summit.

"I didn't see the letter; I don't have any comments," Owens said Thursday, though he did say he supports renewable energy.

Rich Grice, with the governor's Office of Energy Management and Conservation, did have an opinion. "It is a big pill to swallow," Grice said, referring to the target number of megawatts.

Christopher Castilian, Owens' deputy chief of staff, policy and initiatives, said he couldn't comment on whether the governor supports Richardson's proposal but did offer that government regulation might not be the way to go. "We are looking at what is achievable in Colorado," Castilian said. "And Governor Owens wants to do that without government mandate. Markets do a better job in clean-energy development than government regulation."

Castilian reiterated that Owens supports clean-energy alternatives. "Colorado's biggest utility, Xcel Energy, has about 250 megawatts to 270 megawatts of wind energy, and we anticipate it to go up to 800 megawatts by 2010," Castilian said. "The governor is proud that Colorado is a leading producer of clean coal, and we have abundant natural gas reserves."

Clean energy, as defined by Richardson's letter, includes solar, wind, biomass, clean coal, natural gas and hydropower sources. The letter also urges Western states to increase the efficiency of energy use by 20 percent by 2020. "The West is blessed with vast energy resources," Richardson said. "We are committed to an approach that will help secure a diversified energy supply, energy efficiency and best practices in energy development."

Owens and Richardson jointly released a handbook on best practices in coal-bed methane - a technique to extract natural gas from coal-bed seams - at the summit.

Environmental activist Howard Geller of the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project worries about the WGA's clean-energy policies under Owens' chairmanship.

"I think Governor Richardson understands that clean energy and renewable energy are the growth areas in the Western United States as elsewhere," Geller said. "I am hopeful that Governor Owens will follow through with the objectives when he takes over as WGA chairman."

"Clean energy makes economic sense, saves money, creates jobs and saves water. How could any governor not embrace this vision?" Geller said.

"A big question with this proposal is the policies states need to adopt to achieve 30,000 megawatts by 2015," said Jim Sims, executive director of the Golden-based Western Business Roundtable, which lobbies on energy-related issues.

"Collaborative efforts across the West to encourage clean-energy alternatives should be embraced by all states in the West," Sims said. "But the question is: How do we get there? Will it be through government mandates or through voluntary economic incentives?"

"If the thrust of this letter is to have government-enforced mandates on energy choices, then history shows that it doesn't work as well," Sims said. "On the other hand, if the focus is on market-based incentives to make these choices, then it's a better path to success."

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