Rhode Island's Renewable Energy Programs: Overview

Approximately twenty percent of Rhode Island's greenhouse gas emissions come from the generation of the electricity we use. The good news is that Rhode Island has outstanding programs for renewable energy development. As members of the Rhode Island community we should know the basics of these programs, use the programs to their fullest advantage, and vigorously support their continuation and expansion.

More than 99% of Rhode Islanders get our electricity from National Grid, an electricity and natural gas distribution company. Distribution companies are regulated utilities: this means that the state can specify that we want a certain minimum percentage of the electricity that the utility buys, and then sells to us, to come from renewable sources. In Rhode Island, this renewable energy standard has been extended through 2035, so that each year at least 1.5% more of the electricity acquired for use in Rhode Island is to come from renewable resources.

Rhode Island has three programs supporting renewable energy development. The first is for large projects, such as the landfill gas project in Johnston and Block Island's offshore wind project, the first in the nation. This is called a long-term contracting standards program. The other two programs are more familiar and widespread: net metering and distributed generation. They can support the development of the same kinds of renewable energy facilities, but they do it in different ways. We can

participate in these programs to reduce our state's fossil fuel emissions.

Generating our electricity locally and in a variety of ways can make our energy supply more secure. It also benefits our state's economy overall, by keeping money spent for energy in Rhode Island rather than shipping it to other places, and keeping Rhode Islanders employed in renewable energy jobs.

We can also encourage the state to add more programs, more policies and more incentives to move toward renewable energy sources for all of our electricity, combined with a strategy that taxes fossil fuel companies for what they sell to Rhode Island. Insisting that all new energy infrastructure in Rhode Island is for renewable energy, not fossil fuels, is another way to encourage renewable energy development and to protect vulnerable communities and the natural world.

Net Metering: How It Works and How to Do It

Five ways to help our state build renewable energy

- Get an assessment from a solar vendor
- Use Rhode Island's programs to add a solar installation to your building
- Ask your city council or town manager about virtual net metering
- If you work for the city/town, a state agency, or a nonprofit, ask them too
- Ask the governor about her renewable energy plan for state facilities

With net metering, if you install renewable energy facilities (or contract for them), your energy meter runs both ways. Incoming electricity from the grid is charged to your account. Outgoing electricity, the amount you haven't used yourself, is credited to your account. Since sometimes the sun shines and the wind blows and sometimes it doesn't, the principle is to have the amount in and the amount out balanced at the end of the year.

Household action: The first step is calling a solar vendor—you can use the Office of Energy Resource's list: http://www.energy.ri.gov/renewable/REP/ They will make a free assessment of your building's roof for its exposure to the sun, calculate how much electricity you could expect to generate in an average year, and show you—based on current programs—how quickly the initial cost of your installation will be paid back, and what its overall benefit to you will be. They can also calculate which of the two programs (Renewable Energy Growth or the Renewable Energy Fund) would be better for you to work with, based on how much electricity you can generate.

Cities and towns, government agencies, and non-profits can have the renewable energy capacity in one location and the meters being credited with the production in another location. This arrangement is known as virtual net metering. In this arrangement, the same meter still measures the electricity produced and the electricity consumed.

Community action: Call Governor Raimondo's office at (401) 222-2080 and ask that she reveal and implement her renewable energy plan for state facilities. Stress that this needs to happen soon, or project developers won't have enough time to help the state meet its goal for 2020.

Distributed Generation: How It Works and How to Do It

Five ways to help our state build

renewable energy

Save Print

- Get an assessment from a solar vendor
- Use Rhode Island's programs to add a solar installation to your building
- Ask your city council or town manager about virtual net metering
- If you work for the city/town, a state agency, or a nonprofit, ask them too
- Ask the governor about her renewable energy plan for state facilities

Distributed generation also involves a renewable installation (solar or wind), but uses two meters: one meter measures the incoming electricity used by the customer, the other measures the outgoing electricity produced by the customer.

The customer pays the standard rate for the incoming electricity and receives a different, often higher, rate for the outgoing electricity from your renewable energy installation. The outgoing rate the customers receives pays for the cost of the renewable system over time; this rate fixed is received for a period of 15 or twenty years. For residential distributed generation customers, the amount of electricity generated and the amount of electricity used are designed to balance over the course of the year.

Household action: The first step is calling a solar vendor—you can use the Office of Energy Resource's list. They will make a free assessment of your building's roof for its exposure to the sun, calculate how much electricity you could expect to generate in an average year, and show you—based on current programs—how quickly the initial cost of your installation will be paid back, and what its overall benefit to you will be.

In commercial installations, this balance is not required. Some facility owners may use most of the load of electricity they generate; others may have much smaller loads. In the latter instance, the renewable energy installation is a commercial venture serving the grid as a source of power generation. Distributed generation helps National Grid meet its obligation to provide Rhode Islanders electricity from renewable, non-carbon emitting energy resources.

Community action: The Office of Energy Resources launched SolarizeRI to increase adoption of small scale solar, organized at the municipal level—see http://www.energy.ri.gov/renewable/solarize/ for more details. This is like buying in bulk: when a group of people get their energy this way, it brings down the unit cost of installing the systems. If your city/town is listed on their website, you can sign up for a solar energy evaluation for your home or business. If it's not, work with your neighbors to tell your mayor or town manager that there's strong interest in this program.

Carbon Pricing: Energizing Rhode

Island

Carbon pricing, also known as a carbon tax, is a way to incentivize society's transition away from fossil fuels. The idea is to charge fossil fuel companies a tax on every unit of fossil fuel they sell. Federal carbon taxes have been proposed, but in the current political climate, passing state legislation is more promising. Most New England and west coast states are currently considering carbon pricing bills. Here in Rhode Island, the proposed bill is called Energize Rhode Island.

The Energize RI bill would rebate most of the tax revenue collected directly to all Rhode Island residents and employees. Rhode Islanders who use less than an average amount of fossil fuels would come out ahead. The remaining revenue collected would go toward a Clean Energy and Jobs fund, training and paying for jobs in weatherization, construction, and renewable energy resources, and expanding access to renewable energy and energy efficiency for more Rhode Islanders.

Carbon pricing helps to fund the kind of work and development that makes renewable energy and energy efficiency more widespread and usable—important because people, companies and governments often use lack of money as a reason to avoid making these changes. And it means that fossil fuel companies help pay for the changes that offset the damage they caused, rather than passing the bulk of that financial burden on to society.

Carbon pricing is one potential interim step in developing our capacity to leave fossil fuels behind forever and stop producing greenhouse gases. By providing a financial incentive for reducing carbon pollution, it uses market forces to encourage a transition to renewable energy and a cleaner state.

Community action: If you learn more about how a carbon pricing bill might help to create or fund jobs in your field or in your town, you can urge neighbors and people in your industry to support it. If have more detailed questions about how it would work, or want to urge your elected officials to support it in the future, visit the Energize RI site.