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Green groups scold Owens **Vetoes of four environment-related bills denounced**

By Theo Stein
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Environmental groups Monday panned Gov. Bill Owens' vetoes of four bills promoting energy efficiency, water conservation and open-space protection, calling the Republican "out of touch" with Coloradans.

Owens shot back, saying the bills had "fluffy titles and fatal flaws."

The groups criticizing Owens were Western Resource Advocates, Environment Colorado, the Sierra Club and the Colorado Environmental Coalition. A new voice also joined the chorus of criticism Monday: Xcel Energy, Colorado's largest electric utility.

On Friday, Owens rejected House Bill 1133, which would have allowed large utilities such as Xcel and Kinder Morgan Inc. to pass the cost of energy-efficiency programs on to ratepayers. The bill mirrored laws on the books in California and Arizona.

"We were disappointed that the governor vetoed the bill," Mark Stutz, a spokesman for Xcel, said in an interview. "This is a bill that is designed to promote efficiency through demand management," Stutz said. "Any program that makes use of natural gas more efficient we think is a benefit to our customers."

In his veto letter, Owens objected to the bill because he said the rate hikes were unfair to homeowners who already have improved their energy efficiency. "The bill also required that the efficiency measures be cost-effective," said Rep. Tom Plant, D-Nederland, the bill's sponsor, "so consumers would have consumed less energy and saved money."

In April, Owens killed House Bill 1162, which would have required energy-efficiency standards on 14 household appliances, from lights to freezers. The two bills would have saved Coloradans more than \$1 billion in reduced natural-gas bills over 10 years, according to Howard Geller, executive director of the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project.

"Governor Owens, like President Bush and Vice President Cheney, is no friend of energy conservation," Geller said. "It's not part of their energy agenda."

Two earlier Owens vetoes also irked environmental groups:

- House Bill 1070, which would have overturned residential covenants that required homeowners to plant thirsty bluegrass and barred less water-demanding plants and gardens. The bill also banned watering at state buildings during the heat of the day.

- Senate Bill 174, which allowed counties to exceed the current sales-tax cap in order to raise more money to protect open space.

"All had good titles, but none were good policy," Owens said in an interview at a bill signing in Minturn. Geller predicted the energy bills, at least, would be back. "We'll bring them back next year," he said. "And if necessary, we'll bring them back the year after."

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