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Ritter's renewable energy package making its way into law

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The Associated Press

DENVER — Four months after saying his “New Energy Economy” was more than a campaign promise, Gov. Bill Ritter will sign a half-dozen measures this week encouraging Coloradans to make more renewable energy and consume less fuel overall.

On Tuesday, Ritter signed a bill that rewards utilities for promoting energy conservation. It was vetoed twice by his predecessor, GOP Gov. Bill Owens.

On Wednesday, Ritter plans to sign measures to promote recycling and biofuels development, encourage construction of transmission lines from solar and wind farms and provide tax credits for renewable energy.

They are among 18 measures pushed through the Legislature this session with bipartisan support. Ritter, a Democrat, made renewable energy a key part of his election campaign last year, and in his State of the State speech in January he said he wanted to make the state a leader in the field. “All we’re missing is a state government to lead, to inspire and to invest,” he said then.

Environmentalists said they got almost everything they wanted this year, except for one component, a net metering bill that would require utilities to buy electricity from customers who produce their own renewable energy. They said they will try again next year to pass that bill.

“We absolutely made significant progress this year. We doubled Colorado’s commitment to increase the amount of electricity from renewable energy, we have legislation that could cut in half the increase in demand from Xcel Energy and we removed some of the barriers to building new transmission lines,” said Will Coyne, program director with Environment Colorado, a coalition of environmental groups that pushed this year’s agenda.

Backers of the bill signed Tuesday said it will do more to cut energy consumption than any of the other renewable energy bills passed this year. They estimated it could cut energy bills by \$1.2 billion over the next 13 years and eliminate the need for a new 350-megawatt power plant.

Howard Geller, executive director of the Boulder-based Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, said reducing energy consumption requires a one-two punch that increases development of renewable energy and reduces the amount of energy needed. “This is the punch that will really bring home the economic benefit for the consumers,” he said.

Bill sponsor Rep. Claire Levy, D-Boulder, said the programs would save enough natural gas to power 146,000 homes a year by 2020. She said her bill would allow major utilities to offer incentives for installing heat-efficient windows and water heaters, and to reward consumers and builders of energy-efficient homes with rebates and incentives.

The bill will allow utilities to add 50 cents a month to residential utility bills to pay for the programs.

Owens vetoed two similar proposals. He said last year’s measure would have unfairly burdened residential utility customers and would have been unfair to households that are already energy-efficient. This year’s proposal covers both residential and commercial rate payers.