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## **NOW IS THE TIME: SPEAK UP ON ENERGY**

By Jill K. Cliburn

**T**he 2003 federal energy bill, criticized for its high cost to taxpayers and to the environment, was finally withdrawn from consideration by the U.S. Senate on November 25. Many New Mexicans opposed the bill and thank Senator Jeff Bingaman for his principled stand against it. But those who opposed the bill share one thing with those who favored it—a deep sense of frustration. After months of political wrangling, we do not have a national energy policy that makes our country stronger, or cleaner, or safer.

So where do we look to replace paralysis with progress? Certainly, Congress will try to take up energy issues again next year, and we can hope for a better outcome. But in addition—and starting now—New Mexicans can voice support for clean energy policies rooted in our own tough soil, led by state government, state-based utilities, and local communities.

While deadlock plagues Washington, D.C., the stars are lining up to favor progress on clean energy issues in Santa Fe. Last spring, the state legislature gave unanimous support to Governor Richardson's clean energy goals. The Public Regulation Commission passed a renewable energy portfolio standard that has been lauded as one of the best in the nation. The legislature will consider passing supportive legislation for that standard next year.

As the 2004 legislative session approaches, the Governor's office is preparing other energy proposals. One would provide tax incentives for energy saving vehicles. Another would initiate a Clean Energy Fund to support energy efficiency and renewable energy projects with partners in communities statewide. A separate Bond Fund would support similar projects in state buildings, using energy savings to substantially pay back the cost of the program.

In addition, the state's Construction Industries Commission is considering updating the State's mandatory building code. By adopting a modern code such as the widely accepted International Energy Conservation Code, the Commission would trigger significant energy savings in new homes and commercial buildings—for years to come.

New Mexico citizens are starting to organize around clean energy issues. Recently, the New Mexico Conference of Churches and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish

Life sponsored a conference on clean energy alternatives to global warming. The meeting drew more than 100 participants from congregations statewide. A plan for a community-based wood heating project in Santa Fe has sparked interest in all kinds of renewable energy and energy-saving alternatives here.

But New Mexico is as vulnerable as Washington, D.C. to a train wreck of special interests, if we are not clear from the start about what kind of energy future we want. The policy proposals I just described are a start—but only a start—in a state that currently relies on coal for more than 85 percent of its electricity and whose utilities invest only about one-seventh as much in energy efficiency as Colorado’s utilities do. That’s less than one-tenth as much as a state the size of New Mexico would invest to be on par with the half-dozen states that lead in energy efficiency program funding. Any realist has to recognize that New Mexico is heavily invested in the fossil fuel industry, and that it will take commitment to build a more sustainable energy future for our state.

But the state is a good place to start. According to the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, state energy efficiency funding has increased nationwide in recent years, even as federal funding has dropped. States from New Hampshire to California have stepped ahead of federal leaders to address global warming. New Mexico can join these states—to benefit our families and to influence a better national energy policy.

The worst threats to progress on many public issues are frustration and cynicism. While the 2003 federal energy bill understandably triggers these feelings for many, there is an antidote: Let’s get to work making energy efficiency, renewables, and resource conservation the cornerstones for a truly strong and sustainable economy for our state.

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