

Colorado Academy Helps Spur Sweeping State Clean Energy Bills

By Bobby Magill

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- Co-sponsors of bills setting 100 percent renewable energy targets in three states attended academy
- Lawmakers behind related bills in three other states also attended

A clean energy academy for state lawmakers from across the U.S. has its fingerprints on renewable energy and climate change legislation advancing through state legislatures nationwide.

At least one co-sponsor of renewable energy legislation introduced this year in Nevada, Washington, New Mexico, Utah, Oregon, and Maine attended the Clean Energy Legislative Academy in Breckenridge, Colo., in 2017 or 2018.

The academy is part of Colorado State University's Center for the New Energy Economy, led by former Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter (D), who founded the center after he left office in 2011.

The academy has played a key role in “activating this clean energy movement across state legislatures,” and helping state lawmakers share ideas and experience with each other, said Tim Profeta, director of the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University.

Since opening in 2017, the academy has been attended by 40 Democratic and 16 Republican lawmakers from 28 states, plus a nonpartisan senator from Nebraska's unicameral Legislature and 37 legislative staff, according to the listed attendees on the academy's website.

'Stars Have Aligned'

Led by California, which passed a law in 2018 that mandates the state to obtain all of its electricity from clean energy sources by 2045, states are increasingly taking their own steps to address climate change at a time when renewable energy costs are falling and the federal government moves away from efforts to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

This year, bills in Washington state, New Mexico, and Maine—all with links to the Colorado academy—aim to set goals to obtain all of those states' energy from wind, solar and other clean energy sources. The bills are one example of steps toward decarbonization to address climate change that followed Democratic wins in statehouses in the 2018 elections.

The Colorado Senate, Maine Senate, New York Senate, Minnesota House and both chambers in New Hampshire's legislature flipped from Republican-controlled to Democratic-controlled after the last elections.

"I think the stars have aligned a little bit, driven by changing economics of renewable energy and driven by the urgency of climate change," said Jeff Deyette, director of state policy and analysis in the Climate and Energy program at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Center for the New Energy Economy acts as an advanced energy policy think tank for states and works with them directly, Ritter told Bloomberg Environment. "We're using those tools to assist those legislators in understanding where their state currently stands, what's the potential for doing something else in their state," he said.

Bipartisan Interest in Renewables

Lawmakers who attended the academy and whose bills have been passed or are advancing through state legislatures in 2019 include:

- New Mexico state Rep. Nathan P. Small (D), who co-sponsored a bill signed into law in March that aims to fully decarbonize the state's electricity sector by 2045.
- Washington state Sen. Reuven Carlyle (D), chief sponsor of a bill passed in April that awaits Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee's signature. The bill aims to fully decarbonize the state's electric power sector by 2045.
- Nevada state Democratic senators Moises Denis, Chris Brooks and Pat Spearman, who were three of five primary sponsors of a bill passed in April requiring 50 percent of the state's electricity to be produced from renewable sources.
- Maine state Rep. Matthew Pouliot (R), a co-sponsor of a bipartisan bill moving through the Maine Legislature that sets greenhouse gas reduction targets and a climate change action plan for Maine. The bill would require 100 percent of the state's electricity to be generated by renewable sources by 2050.
- Utah state Rep. Stephen Handy (R), chief sponsor of Utah's Community Renewable Energy Act, which was signed into state law by Gov. Gary Herbert (R) in March. The law allows local communities to create their own renewable energy program and requires them to set a goal to obtain 100 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2030.
- Oregon Rep. Karin Power (D), co-chair of the state's Joint Committee on Carbon Reduction, which is the sponsor of a sweeping state cap-and-trade bill, which sets a declining cap on greenhouse gas emissions and establishes a market system for trading emissions allowances.

'You Learn That It Can Be Done'

The Center for the New Energy Economy also had a hand this year in helping to pass an Arkansas bill that allows residents to lease solar panels, which state law had prohibited, said Arkansas state Rep. Vivian Flowers (D), who attended the academy in 2018.

The passage of the solar bill, which Flowers supported but didn't co-sponsor, set a renewable-energy precedent in Republican-leaning Arkansas, Flowers said.

“You learn that it can be done,” she said.

Handy, the Utah Republican lawmaker, said his experience at the academy made him open to a suggestion from a Utah electric utility to allow communities to obtain their power entirely from renewable energy.

“Had I not had orientation from the legislative academy, maybe I wouldn’t have been so attuned to it,” Handy said, referring to the utility’s proposal.

Handy said the academy declined his request to draft model legislation. However, the academy influenced his approach to writing the bill, shaping his understanding of consumer demand for renewables and helping him to frame discussions of that demand and the legislation as being part of the “new energy economy.”

Deep Dive

Those attending the two-part summer academy hear from clean energy experts and examine clean energy policy gaps and opportunities in each state, using a state legislation tracker as part of the training, Ritter said. This year’s sessions will be held in August and September.

Some lawmakers who attended the academy said it didn’t necessarily shape their legislation directly, but influenced their understanding of renewable energy and the electricity sector.

Small, the Democrat from New Mexico, said the academy was a “deep dive” into energy policy with data-sharing and perspectives from across the political spectrum.

Denis, the Nevada Democrat, said the academy is the first university-sponsored policy workshop he has heard of, and it helped him to “internalize” facets of renewable energy policy he needed to learn more about.

Carlyle, the Washington state Democrat, said the academy validated his views that renewable energy legislation needs to be functional and not simply aspire to cut greenhouse gas emissions. He attended in 2017.

“I took a lot away from the conference in terms of not feeling like I was an outlier,” Carlyle said. “I just didn’t want to pass what seemed ideological or religious about shutting down fossil fuels but didn’t achieve the actual goal of moving toward a renewable energy system.”

—With assistance from Adrienne Appel.

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