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ALERT

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## Bill to overhaul Wyoming net metering rule fails after massive public pushback

Camille Erickson Nov 19, 2019 Updated 18 min ago



The Sweetwater Solar energy project, which covers about 700 acres northwest of Green River, pictured in February. It is the first utility-scale solar energy farm in Wyoming.

Alan Rogers, Star-Tribune

**C**HEYENNE — A decade ago, Jenelle Gaddis built her home about 10 miles outside of Laramie. She hoped to go entirely “off grid,” meaning her family would not rely on a utility to supply their electricity. But divesting from the utility was

too cost-prohibitive, she said. She had little other choice but to invest thousands of dollars in infrastructure to hook up to the utility grid.

But her electrical bills were expensive, climbing to several hundred dollars a month during the winter, she said. Gaddis turned to other energy options to supply a portion of her overall electricity. With the price of renewable energy technology declining, she decided to install solar panels on her property.

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Gaddis is currently considered a net metering customer. As a small-scale electricity generator, she receives credit for excess energy her solar installation contribute to the utility grid. During the first three months of the year, she sometimes taps into the utility grid to supply some extra heat. But the solar panels supply most of her electricity, she explained.

But this year, she started to worry about the consequences of her choice to turn to solar.

Lawmakers introduced multiple bills to repeal or amend the state's net metering statute. But after more than four hours of impassioned public testimony Tuesday, two bills drafted to overhaul the state's net metering system failed to advance to session. **The Legislature's Joint Corporations, Elections and Political Subdivisions Committee** voted 7-7, causing the bills to fail.

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Residents and businesses using solar power on a small scale emerged from the packed committee room relieved.

The proposed **legislation** would have come at a steep cost, according to testimony from several residents and entrepreneurs. For small-scale electricity generators, the changes to the net metering rule would have tripled the payback period for solar installations. To Wyoming's budding solar industry, the bill could have deterred future solar customers and killed small solar contractors.

“If they reverse the net metering (statute) there will not be much incentive to install solar,” Gaddis said.

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Gaddis was motivated to invest in renewable energy because of her grandchildren. She's worried Wyoming's coal, oil and gas are finite, declining resources that future generations may not be able to rely on.

“At my age of 70, I don't think it will impact my generation much, but my grandchildren probably will,” she said.



### **To chagrin of solar advocates, Wyoming lawmakers consider utility overhauls**

Camille Erickson

Wyoming introduced a net metering system about 20 years ago to apply to small energy generators. But to several lawmakers, the current system is stacked against the average utility consumer who simply wants to save money on electricity because of “cost shifting.” Cost shifting occurs if one group of consumers, in this case small energy generators, shifts certain expenses onto utility ratepayers.

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Rep. Danny Eyre, R-Lyman, told the Star-Tribune some degree of cost shifting is occurring under the current net metering system. By not paying the same amount of fixed fees as other ratepayers, independent solar generators fail to contribute their fair share of “operating, maintenance and capital costs” associated with utility infrastructure, he said. That loss eventually shifts to utility ratepayers, or those that do not employ solar or other renewable energy sources, Eyre explained.

**According to the Office of Consumer Advocate**, net metering system does provide customers generating electricity with small subsidies. “The net metering customers are not paying their share of the fixed costs,” Denise Parrish, deputy administrator of the agency, stated Tuesday. “Now, (research) shows that the subsidies are rather small now (relative to total revenues of a utility company), as are the net metering customers. But they are growing, so we would encourage you to take this up now rather than let it become an even greater issue.” Eyre said he does not intend to “kill” the solar industry by advancing the bills. Since introducing a memorandum in September, lawmakers incorporated changes to temper the effect of the bill on existing net metering customers, including certain exemptions for current net metering customers.

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### Wyoming utility leading drive to expand wind and solar

Jon Cox, PacifiCorp vice president of government affairs, testified to Wyoming lawmakers in support of changes to net metering.

Black Hills Energy, a utility with over 360 net metering customers in Wyoming, supported the repeal of a net metering system, though it supported grandfathering in existing net metering customers and providing ample time for entrepreneurs to adapt to the changes, according to a spokesman.

But to Stacey Schmid, president of the **Wyoming Solar Energy Association**, an organization representing solar entrepreneurs, the consequences of the bills would have been devastating to small business owners and Wyoming residents.

“Young people want to see solar, and this bill would shut down many of our businesses statewide,” Schmid said.

Six high school students representing **Laramie Youth Council** testified in opposition to the bills too.

“This is an issue of economic development and diversification,” Sam Miller, 17, stated. “We are the ones that will inherit Wyoming’s economy. ... These bills would strip away incentives for solar energy. This is a really big deal.”

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**Camille Erickson**  
Energy and Natural Resources Reporter

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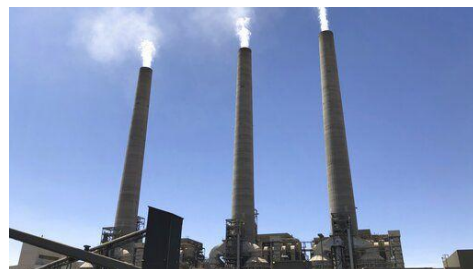
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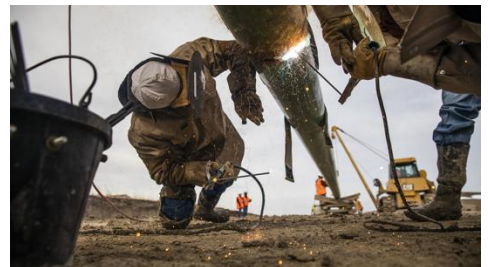
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