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## Lawmakers tour Alaska to garner input on energy plans

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FAIRBANKS — State senators are hosting hearings next week in the Interior to gather input as they craft an Alaska energy policy.

Such a policy would direct spending and projects well into the future, lawmakers said.

“Ultimately, what we want is a plan that will provide affordable energy for all Alaskans, with an emphasis on renewables and conservation,” said Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage. He is co-chairman of the Senate Resources Committee and sits on the Senate Special Committee on Energy, which are teaming up for the field hearings.

Alaska is one of the few states without a broad, top-level energy policy that guides spending decisions, lawmakers said. With a policy in place, state leaders can craft a plan to reach the general goals — a plan that likely would address renewables, conservation, efficiency and regional differences while working toward energy independence and accessibility.

Sen. Lesil McGuire, R-Anchorage, chairs the Energy Committee and co-chairs the Resources Committee. She said hours of testimony through the legislative session, as well as the urgent need for long-term solutions felt in most of the state’s communities, is directing a sharp focus on an energy plan.

“Frankly, energy policy in the past 50 years has been a patchwork,” McGuire said.

She said policy has been driven by immediate, changing crises, likening it to a piecemeal quilt.

“It’s got all different shapes, sizes, fabric swatches, that have been sewn in at different times, and often haphazardly,” she said. “The idea is to really think about (a policy) in an overarching light, from 35,000 feet, so the Legislature has a path by which it makes appropriations.”

Joe Balash, intergovernmental coordinator for Gov. Sarah Palin, said Alaska has an energy policy and is helping communities craft plans, or road maps, to meet that broader goal.

“We want to rely on local resources wherever and whenever possible,” Balash said. “At the same time, we want to turn to renewable resources.”

Local supplies are “pretty damn important when it’s 40 below out,” he added.

“It’s not for Juneau to decide each and every community’s energy future,” Balash said, adding the state might not be moving fast enough for some but is working deliberately to present those options.

At the field hearings next week, committee members want to hear how people are heating their homes, what communities need from the state to develop stronger energy sources and more.

“We heard that people in Fairbanks were burning coal at some point last winter,” McGuire said. “Those are pretty gut-wrenching stories.”

McGuire said Alaskans recognize energy as a basic need, like food and shelter, and also believe in fairness. A policy should reflect those positions, as well as the constitutional declaration that the state’s resources should be shared by all and developed for maximum benefit.

Sen. Joe Thomas, D-Fairbanks, will attend the hearings in Fairbanks and two villages. He said he wants to be sure an energy policy incorporates conservation and efficiency standards and that projects the state invests in are scientifically sound with a pay-off expected.

Geothermal, wind, solar and other alternatives are likely an ideal way to wean Alaska off diesel, but only where they make sense, he said.

“If the sun isn’t shining and the wind isn’t blowing and it’s 30 below, we’re in trouble,” he said. “We have to be practical about what we’re doing. I certainly don’t want to slow down the process, but there needs to be more coordination.”

Information collected at hearings hosted around the state this summer and fall would be assembled into a policy and presented to lawmakers when the legislative session begins in January, McGuire said.

House committees also are traveling around Alaska, talking with people about how to address energy needs. The House and Senate groups will work separately through the summer, then host a joint meeting to share experiences, McGuire said.

“Ultimately, any plan or policy that you do, you’re going to need significant involvement from both the Legislature and the executive branch,” Wielechowski said, noting that lawmakers hold the key to the state’s treasury.

Planning to attend are six senators on the committees and Interior lawmakers Sens. Joe Paskvan and Thomas, both Democrats.

Paskvan said he welcomes the committees to Fairbanks.

“It’s important that they see there is innovative research going on in Interior Alaska that is part of the energy solutions we’re all looking for,” Paskvan said.

He singled out geothermal work at Chena Hot Springs Resort, conservation and efficiency advances at the Cold Climate Housing Research Center and studies at the Alaska Center for Energy and Power.

“Can that research be applied elsewhere in Alaska?” he asked. “It’s very exciting to me that the senators recognize Interior Alaska is a center for research and innovation.”

On the agenda:

- In Fairbanks on Tuesday, the group will tour Chena Hot Springs’ geothermal setup as well as the Cold Climate Housing Research Center and the Alaska Center for Energy and Power. The public can make their voices heard at a hearing from 5-7 p.m. at Room 109 in the Butrovich Building at University of Alaska Fairbanks.
- On Wednesday, the supercommittee will board a plane to Tanana and tour flood-damaged areas and a Garn boiler system powered with driftwood gathered from the Yukon River. A public hearing is scheduled from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the community hall.
- That afternoon, lawmakers will fly to Ruby and examine an in-river hydropower generator. A public meeting is set for 3:30-5:30 p.m. at the community hall.