

## Comment period for Vermont's Comprehensive Energy Plan extended

by [Alan Panebaker](#) | October 7, 2011

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Elizabeth Miller, commissioner of the Department of Public Services. VTD/Josh Larkin

The Department of Public Service extended the written comment period for the [Vermont Comprehensive Energy Plan](#) on Friday, just a few days before the deadline on Oct. 10.

On the heels of a request from Vermont Energy Partnership and queries from regional planning commissions and the Vermont Public Power Supply Authority, the department extended the comment period by nearly a month. Public comments will now be accepted through Nov. 4.

Commissioner of the Department of Public Service Elizabeth Miller said the new comment deadline will push the tentative date for the presentation of the plan to the beginning of December.

The Vermont Energy Partnership drafted a letter on Friday, requesting an extra month to review the extensive plan.

"People were just saying: 'Gosh, there's a lot here, and I can't really wrap my mind around it in such a short time,'" said Guy Page, communications director for the Vermont Energy Partnership. Page said the partnership entities, including Entergy Corp., which owns Vermont Yankee, want more time to digest the plan.

The draft plan, released in mid-September, provides a detailed look at Vermont's current energy portfolio and outlines a plan for future sources of fuel and renewables for heating, transportation and electricity.

Most notably, it proposes a shift in all energy sources to 90 percent renewables by 2050.

The Vermont Department of Public Service compiled three documents totaling nearly 600 pages with appendices that address efficiency, electricity, thermal energy, land use and transportation. The plan will become final when Gov. Peter Shumlin, who campaigned on an aggressive renewable energy platform, endorses it. Legislative approval is not required for the plan itself to go into effect.

The Vermont Legislature charged the Vermont Department of Public Service with conducting a comprehensive analysis of the use, cost, supply and environmental effects of all energy sources. The department made recommendations to implement the plan in conjunction with other agencies.

The department has held five public hearings around the state.

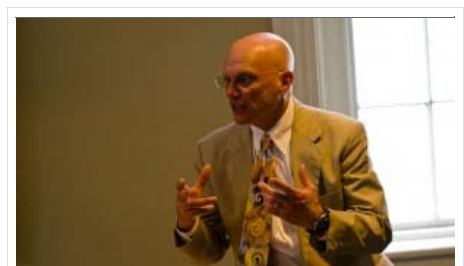
"What I want Vermonters to get out of this plan is that our energy needs are diverse," Miller said.

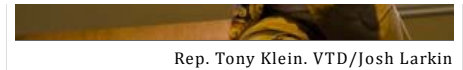
Proponents of the plan say it will dramatically shift Vermont away from reliance on fossil fuels toward renewable energy.

"It's necessarily ambitious," said Rep. Tony Klein, D-East Montpelier. "If you don't make high stakes, you don't get anywhere."

The primary challenge, Klein said, will be transportation. Residents currently rely heavily on highway travel. The state would have to invest in public transit to population centers to reduce use of large amounts of fossil fuels.

According to the plan, motor gasoline represents the single largest source of energy consumption—25.2 percent, according to 2009 figures. Nuclear power for electricity comes in second at 15.27 percent, and fuel for heating is a close third at 12.87 percent. Although short on specifics, the plan's broad approach brings everything into the fold, with specific answers for some problems and plans for more studies in other spots like the recommendation that the governor's Climate Cabinet "should set a work plan to study a Total Energy Standard program, targeting legislative consideration of any plan developed in 2013." For transportation, the draft plan pushes for a shift in land use and a transition to electric vehicles.





Rep. Tony Klein. VTD/Josh Larkin

The best place to begin, Klein said, is with energy efficiency. Improving the thermal efficiency of buildings in the state, he said, would put a large dent in the amount of energy we use. But as with many of the plan's recommendations, Klein said, "the magic ingredient is money."

The challenge, as noted by many who have reviewed the plan, is putting it into effect. The state has overarching authority over companies such as utilities that are "engaged in the manufacture, transmission, distribution or sale of gas or electricity," but the state's ability to regulate fuel oil and propane companies is limited, according to a study prepared by the Vermont Law School Institute for Energy and the Environment, the Vermont Department of Public Service and the Public Service Board.

Although the Public Service Board's regulatory jurisdiction extends only to utilities (the Department of Public Service represents the public in PSB proceedings), the plan addresses every aspect of power generation and distribution. The statute mandating the plan states that DPS and other agencies must, as best they can, assure that the plan assures energy will be secure, reliable and affordable.

Robert Dostis, a spokesman for Green Mountain Power, said the Legislature set the path for a shift to renewable energy in the electric sector because it is already regulated. With transportation, Dostis said, individuals need to take more voluntary measures to reduce their carbon footprints.

Meeting the goal of 90 percent "baseload" electric energy from renewable sources by 2050 with better technology, Dostis said, is "very doable." Baseload, in utility parlance, refers to a reasonable minimum supply of energy that utilities expect their customers will require. The challenge, he said, will be getting more energy from so-called "intermittent" sources like wind, solar and small-scale hydro. One of the issues, Dostis explained, is that these sources, like wind and solar, are not available at all times. Sources like nuclear power, large-scale hydroelectric power from Hydro-Quebec and fossil fuels are used to meet the current "baseload" demands because they provide a more consistent, ongoing source of energy.

Another key to meeting the 90 percent goal, Dostis said, is to develop and implement "smart grid" technology that monitors energy usage and instantaneously transmits that information to utilities so they can accommodate input to the grid from various renewable sources. Since most renewable sources are intermittent, and cannot be turned on and off like fossil fuel sources like coal can be, they are more difficult to sync with immediate energy demand. A smart grid system, Dostis said, would eliminate part of this problem by providing more immediate information to utilities that would allow them to have a better idea of what is going on with the electricity grid and thus allow for increased use of intermittent renewables.

While many cheer the comprehensive plan as a step forward for Vermont, critics argue that the plan could be costly to Vermonters. Sen. Peg Flory, R-Rutland, in an op-ed piece published this week in VTDigger.org, argued that issuing the report when the fate of the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Station is still uncertain is a waste of taxpayer money.

She said shuttering Vermont Yankee could cost taxpayers more money if the state needed to supplement with energy from other states on the New England grid. Flory criticizes the Shumlin administration for "fast-tracking" the plan, and she claims it is premature to set out the state's energy plan when the state's two largest utilities, Green Mountain Power and Central Vermont Public Service, are in the midst of a merger.

***"The real challenge is:  
Dirty energy is cheap.  
Clean energy is  
expensive."***

*- David Hallquist*

The comprehensive plan does, in fact, specifically refrain from addressing the fate of Vermont Yankee, except to note that any shortfall in energy production due to a Vermont Yankee shutdown could be replaced with power from the regional grid. The draft plan also does not analyze other specific projects that are pending before the Vermont Public Service Board.

Meanwhile, Hydro-Quebec, which provides 30 percent of Vermont's electricity, according to 2009 figures, will likely remain a part of the state's renewable portfolio. An agreement between Hydro-Quebec and a group of eight Vermont utilities begins to phase out in 2012, according to the plan. However, 20 Vermont utilities have signed a contract to purchase energy from the Canadian utility in the future.

Vermont is the only New England state to recognize Hydro-Quebec power as "renewable." Without this label, the state would need to replace a significant amount of its electricity with other more expensive sources to meet its 90 percent goal.

Recognizing that there is no silver bullet solution to the state's energy needs, some environmental groups have supported the gist of the DPS draft plan.

James Moore, Vermont Public Interest Research Group energy program director, said he supports the plan, including its treatment of Vermont Yankee and Hydro-Quebec. He said Hydro-Quebec has provided a large part of Vermont's electricity for a long time, so it will remain part of the mix of energy sources. He said he would prefer to see a final draft of the plan be more specific about the types of local renewables the state plans to utilize.

As for Vermont Yankee, Moore said, the plan is looking forward, and "Vermont Yankee is a part of our past," referring to a 2010 Vermont State Senate vote to retire the nuclear power plant when its license expires in March of 2012.

The key, Moore said, is where to look first to make changes to where we get our energy.

"The easiest place to make progress is in the electricity sector," Moore said. He hopes better technology allows the price of renewable energy to decrease and eventually provide a cheaper source of electricity for ratepayers.

In the short term, some industry officials are skeptical about a drastic shift to primary reliance on renewable energy because of the potential cost to ratepayers. David Hallquist, CEO of Vermont Electric Cooperative, said he is leery of proposals that try to create enough energy through renewable sources to provide enough baseload power for the state in the short term.