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Wind and sun to help out, in time

Law sets stage for growth in the future

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New requirements for electric utilities to produce more power from renewable sources won't add more wind or solar power overnight, but the legislation is a step toward a more renewable energy future and should help homeowners with wind turbines or solar panels.

The requirement that companies bring in 10% of their power from renewable sources by 2015 won't really add much to the state's electric grid for several years.

The state's two big utilities, Consumers Energy and DTE Energy, get about 5% of their energy from renewable sources. Each has 14,000 customers who pay a premium each month to get some or all of their electricity from renewable sources.

"Wind is very hot," Anthony Earley Jr., DTE chairman and chief executive officer, said Thursday.

The firm has 30,000 acres in the Thumb under lease for wind farms and is already the nation's second-largest producer of methane gas from landfills, which is used for electricity. "We need to find ways to expand that," he said.

The company hopes to generate power from windmills in two to four years.

Consumers Energy gets its renewable energy from hydroelectric dams, burning of waste wood, wind and landfill gas, said spokesman Jeff Holyfield. By 2015, it will get more power from wind farms.

Environmental groups and independent renewable energy producers were disappointed that Michigan's new standard is low compared with those in many other states, at 10%. Wind firms are less likely to locate here because they would be forced to sell power to the big utilities at whatever price the utilities set, rather than competing on the open market, said David Waymire, spokesman for the Customer Choice coalition.

"It's a farce," he said.

But the law has new benefits for individual homeowners and businesses who put up wind turbines or solar panels, said Jennifer Alvarado, director of the Great Lakes Renewable Energy Association.

The utilities will have to buy a small amount of power from them, she said. If an individual with a wind turbine creates more electricity than needed, the utility would have to issue the consumer a credit at the same rate it charges the homeowner for electricity. In the past, the utility could buy that power for much less. It's a strong incentive for individuals to come up with their own green power, Alvarado said.

"We'll definitely see growth," she said. "For that, it's a very good day for us."

For workshops on alternative energy, see www.glrea.org. Contact **TINA LAM** at 313-222-6421 or tlam@freepress.com.