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New Laws Promote Green Energy

By JEFF TOLLEFSON | The New Mexican



David Simon, director of the New Mexico State Parks, left, leans in to briefly whisper to Gov. Bill Richardson as Joanna Prukop, cabinet secretary, right, hosts a press conference at the New Mexico Audubon Society's Randall Davey Center on Thursday, Mar. 4, 2004 where Gov. Richardson signed legislation relating to energy, environment and state parks. - Kathy De La Torre | The New Mexican

It's certainly not something you hear about every day: government, environmentalists, utilities, industry and ranchers working together on a single issue.

Yet that's what happened with the state of New Mexico's latest law on renewable-energy development, Gov. Bill Richardson said Thursday during a ceremony celebrating the passage of several green legislative initiatives at the Randall Davey Audubon Center.

"I think with responsible partnerships, we can have it all," Richardson said. "We can have a prosperous economy. We can have sensible

development. We can protect the environment, and we can have jobs."

First on the list of bills signed into law was a provision requiring utilities in New Mexico to produce 10 percent of their energy through renewable sources by 2011. The Public Regulation Commission passed a similar requirement -- dubbed a "renewable- portfolio standard" -- in December 2002, but elevating the provision to state law makes court challenges moot.

The new law also allows utilities to create green-power programs that allow individual customers to buy -- and sell -- renewable energy at a premium price, said Ben Luce, chairman of the New Mexico Coalition for Clean Affordable Energy. "This opens the door to the creation of a huge green-power market that will be above and beyond the RPS (renewable-energy portfolio)."

The governor also signed bills that create tax incentives for people who buy energy-efficient vehicles and support renewable energy development. One measure allocates about \$200,000 for efforts to spur and organize hydrogen research and development and another \$500,000 for renewable energy-saving upgrades to state buildings, schools and nonprofit organizations.

Chris Wentz, who heads up conservation efforts for the Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, said the Legislature also appropriated about \$2.6 million out of the governor's budget for energy upgrades at state and school buildings. The governor had requested \$6 million.

Not all of the bills advanced as part of the governor's green energy package were successful.

In particular, a bill that would have created a bonding mechanism to promote energy-efficiency upgrades -- which pay for themselves in lower utility bills -- died without a vote as the session ended. Advocates and state officials plan to return with that bill next year.

Also Thursday, Richardson discussed several initiatives to expand and improve the state park system: \$2 million to establish and run the Mesilla Valley Bosque Park in Doña Ana County; \$3.5 million to purchase 111 acres of ranchland on the west side of Albuquerque and eventually incorporate that land into the Rio Grande State Park; and \$1.7 million for new land acquisitions.

"Amazingly, the State Parks department has not bought an acre of land since 1986," said State Parks Director David Simon. "Under this governor, that is about to change."