

A Difference That Makes A Difference

Why Texas Harvests More Wind Than California Does



Although many states have taken aggressive steps to reduce greenhouse gases, not all of them have. More than half the states now require utilities to generate a percentage of their power from renewable sources such as wind and solar energy, but this is an idea that has yet to gain traction in the Southeast, which has traditionally sought weaker environmental protections. States in the industrial Midwest, meanwhile, are wary of ideas that would limit their use of coal.

The differences in approaches among the states are especially clear when two or more are trying to accomplish similar goals. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the different ways Texas and California have pursued their renewable energy goals.

Despite being an oil state, Texas was actually the first state to set a target for renewable energy. Texas quickly met its goal, set in 1999, of generating 2,000 megawatts of power through renewable sources by 2009. In 2005, the legislature created more ambitious targets—8,800 megawatts by 2015 and 10,000 by 2025. By 2014, Texas was generating 12,755 megawatts, nearly 3 times the wind capacity of the second- and third-ranked states, Iowa and California.

Lots of states are home to plenty of wind and land. But Texas had one additional advantage—lack of regulation. Texas developers have minimal dealings with the state and are able to cut the development deals they need with local officials.

California, by contrast, has built few big wind farms since the 1980s because of the costs and delays caused by the need to comply with environmental regulations,

including concerns about the fact that wind turbines often kill birds.

Regulation and environmental worries have also slowed efforts in California to build large solar plants in the Mojave Desert. Environmentalists were divided about the construction of Green Path North, a \$2 billion transmission line intended to convey geothermal and solar energy from remote desert areas near the Salton Sea to the 5 million customers served by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Residents in San Bernardino County worried that the project would defile some natural scenery and increase the risk of forest fires with colossal steel towers and ugly high-voltage power lines. Indeed, the project was abandoned in 2010.

Most environmentalists concede that California, to meet its greenhouse gas reduction targets, will have to step up its generation of renewable energy—and expand its capacity for transmitting that power across long distances. But development fights such as the one over Green Path North are one reason the state has concentrated much of its efforts not in the area of power generation but in the area of conservation.

The state is aggressively pushing energy efficiency. A 2008 law allows local governments to create assessment districts to provide low-cost, long-term financing for homeowners who install solar panels or upgrade their heating and air-conditioning units. “Strict building codes and energy-saving requirements for home appliances and light bulbs—measures that have been largely ignored by Texas—make an excellent fit for California, where residents are used to being regulated,” reports *The New York Times*.^a

^aKate Galbraith, “California and Texas: Renewable Energy’s Odd Couple,” *New York Times*, October 18, 2009, 3.