



Testimony by Kansas Interfaith Power & Light Director Rabbi Moti Rieber in opposition to HB 2446 – Renewable energy standards and energy storage

My name is Rabbi Moti Rieber, and I am the Director of Kansas Interfaith Power & Light, a statewide nonprofit organization that engages faith communities in environmental stewardship and sustainable practices through the promotion of energy efficiency, energy conservation, and renewable energy.

I am submitting testimony in opposition to the amended version of HB 2446. We support the energy storage provisions of the bill but oppose the amendment freezing the Renewable Portfolio Standards pending construction of the Holcomb II coal-fired power plant.

The Renewable Portfolio Standards (RPS) instituted in May 2009 has proven to be a highly successful initiative in the area of clean energy. Since it was instituted, Siemens built a construction plant in Hutchinson, in large part due to the fact that Kansas had shown a commitment to renewable energy by adapting the RPS. Kansas has also undergone a boom in its wind energy resources – this year we are second in the nation in new wind construction. In other words, the RPS has meant jobs and economic activity throughout the state – in fact, this sector was one of the state's few bright spots during the recent period of economic downturn.

The graduation of the RPS as currently legislated is the very definition of “regulatory certainty.” Businesses have been able to plan their initiatives using the legislated 10-year timeframe. Changing this now would add a counterproductive element of uncertainty to the burgeoning renewable energy industry in our state.

In addition to the economic considerations, there also are significant environmental reasons to leave the RPS alone. Increasing the percentage of renewables in our portfolio lowers our reliance on fossil fuels, especially coal. This is particularly relevant here as the legislation in question here ties the RPS to construction of a coal plant.

Coal is the single most polluting way to create electricity that we have. It releases air pollution, particularly small particulate matter, mercury, sulfur oxides and nitrogen oxides, which are responsible for over 60,000 premature deaths each year nationwide, as well as thousands more cases of asthma and cancer.

Mercury in particular is a significant health danger to the unborn, babies and nursing mothers. That's why people of faith all over the country support safeguards on mercury from coal plants. As Alexei Laushkin of the Evangelical Environmental Network said in an interview last month, “We believe protecting the unborn from mercury poisoning is a consistent pro-life position.”

We can contrast all of this with the clean energy production portfolio of wind and solar, geothermal and small scale hydro, biomass and all the other many forms of energy generation that fall under the umbrella of the RPS. These are responsible for little pollution, and no carbon emissions. We don't purchase the wind from out of state like we do coal. It truly is a homegrown energy resource.

In addition, we've have known since the 1990s that the developed world will have to decrease its production of carbon dioxide in order to prevent the worst of the repercussions of carbon pollution in the atmosphere, including (in Kansas): increases in extreme weather, increased vulnerability to disease, changes in agricultural patterns, difficulty in fresh water access, and more. One of the best and most certain ways we have available to do this is by decreasing our reliance on fossil-fuel-based power generation and moving strongly into the use of renewables – especially wind, solar, biofuels, geothermal and other power sources that fall under the RPS. Backing away from the RPS would mean backing away from the one of the most effective strategies we have to deal with this important issue.

The coal plant in Holcomb is tied up in both federal and state litigation, and neither court is likely to be influenced by the actions of the legislature. The federal court in particular is requiring the kind of thorough environmental impact statement which should have been done in the first place. There is also the question of whether the EPA would allow construction to go forward under its increased levels of oversight. Also, the low price of natural gas has changed the economics around coal-fired energy generation. The present legislation will not affect any of that.

I want to put on record that to the best of my knowledge, none of the environmental organizations working on the Holcomb II issue in 2008 and 2009 were included in the talks that led to the legislative compromise. It was a closed discussion between Gov. Parkinson and Sunflower, and the environmental organizations found out about it when it was announced to the public. That's why we opposed the compromise in the legislature at the time.

The RPS has been a very good starting point for Kansas' move to clean energy, and it has had significant positive economic and environmental effects for our state. Our goal is to build on this accomplishment, to expand the RPS requirements, and to redouble Kansas' efforts in efficiency and clean energy.

In conclusion, the RPS is an economic engine that helps generate jobs throughout our state, and which has had and will continue to have significant environmental benefits for Kansans. The legislation before the committee today ties this productive policy to an unnecessary, wasteful and polluting coal-plant project, one that is not needed and that is tied up in regulatory and judicial uncertainty. This is simply bad policy, which is why we oppose HB 2446 as amended.