

Gov. Martinez unveils 'comprehensive' energy plan

By Steve Terrell, *The New Mexican*

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Gov. Susana Martinez on Monday (Sept. 14) unveiled a new state energy policy that she said would tap every source, from nuclear to fossil fuels to solar and wind.

Speaking to a crowd of about 1,300 in the oil town of Carlsbad, Martinez said her idea is the state's "first comprehensive plan" for energy since 1991.

Martinez, a Republican, called for building more infrastructure, including pipelines, transmission lines and possibly rail lines to the coal mines in northwestern New Mexico. Her plan also calls for promoting New Mexico as a hub for renewable energy storage testing, more emphasis on natural-gas powered vehicles and using less water in energy production.

It includes nuclear energy as part of a low-carbon standard in the state's energy portfolio. In particular, she said, she would look at encouraging manufacturers of small, modular, nuclear reactors to locate in New Mexico.

Martinez's written introduction about the policy noted that the oil and gas industry is a major part of the state's economy, but also mentioned renewable energy.

"The sun also shines brightly and is available for harvest across New Mexico, and the state boasts a thriving solar economy. Additionally, there is an abundance of wind, geothermal and other renewable energy resources," the governor said.

Her plan has been in the works for almost two years. The state Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department spearheaded the effort.

In late 2013, the department's Cabinet secretary, David Martin, established a team that began reviewing all existing state policies regarding energy development. The team also studied efforts by surrounding states, states with similar energy profiles and regional planning organizations.

The department and local economic development groups hosted six "listening sessions" in which about 450 people "representing industry, citizens, non-governmental organizations, and state and local governments" attended those sessions and provided ideas.

Conservationists interviewed Monday praised some aspects of Martinez's plan but criticized others.

"It looks like there are some good ideas in the plan, like working to develop energy storage technologies, but also some very bad ones, like building a rail line to export coal from Northwest

New Mexico,” said Steve Michel of Western Resource Advocates.

Mariel Nanasi of New Energy Economy, said, “I’m delighted that the governor is embracing some less polluting power sources, like solar and wind, that are already a bright spot in our state for jobs.”

But, Nanasi said, the governor “should ban further coal mining and burning. Given our tremendous resources we should be exporting solar and wind power, not seeing how we can export coal.”

Chuck Noble, attorney for the Coalition for Clean and Affordable Energy, said in an email: “A state energy plan is a good idea, but we are concerned that the plan calls for development of fossil fuels without any consideration of increased health and environmental costs placed on New Mexicans from these fuels.”

Martinez’ plan says the state should promote solar batteries, coupled with solar photovoltaic systems in residences.

“With increasing numbers of solar panels being installed on homes, the distribution grid may eventually reach a saturation point where additional power can no longer be fed safely back on the grid,” the plan says, “To ameliorate this issue, homeowners could utilize advanced batteries to store unused energy rather than feeding unused solar power back on the grid, thus precluding the need for upgrades to the distribution grid.”

The plan acknowledges that American utility companies are drastically reducing their use of coal because of regulatory costs.

“The most promising pathways for coal-producing communities are to export coal or find alternative economic activities to support jobs and revenue,” the plan says.

“San Juan Basin coal could be transported to foreign markets, including the European Union and Mexico, if a project to extend freight rail service to San Juan County were realized.”

As for nuclear power, Martinez’s plan says small modular reactors “are one possible pathway to provide needed carbon-free power in a way that reduces issues presented by larger scale nuclear power plants. ... They are less expensive, have more flexible siting and use less water than traditional large nuclear power plants. Many of the new designs use air cooling, are sited in-ground, and turn themselves off automatically if there is a high temperature event.”

But nobody has actually built a small nuclear reactor. The governor’s plan admits that “their true costs and impacts remain unknown.”

According to a recent article in *Forbes*, a company called NuScale “expects to have its design application into the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for review next year. After that, it anticipates being operational no later than 2024 — in the United States.”

The new plan is one of the only times that Martinez has publicly acknowledged renewable energy. Earlier this year, she pocket vetoed a bill approved by the Legislature that would have allowed extension of a solar energy tax credit.

Nellis Kennedy-Howard, of The Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal program, said, “We would hope that

a state energy plan would include a vision that transitions the state away from the dangers of burning and extracting of fossil fuels that consume intense amounts of water and emit toxic pollutants in the process. Our concern at the moment is that this plan instead explores ways to further the development and extraction of fossil fuels which present significant dangers to New Mexico skies and ultimately exposes taxpayers to the impacts these industries have on our health.”

Regina Wheeler, chief executive officer of Positive Energy, a Santa Fe-based solar energy company, participated in the process of putting the plan together.

She said “the recommendations to make New Mexico a center of excellence for storage technology development and deployment and to minimize soft costs associated with solar installations are well-targeted.

Implementation of these recommendations will create jobs, control energy costs and allow New Mexico to continue to be a leader in the energy sector long into our future.”