STATE OF MINNESOTA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

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Chair Commissioner Commissioner Commissioner

In the Matter of Implementation of Solar Energy Standards Pursuant to the 2013 Amendments to Minnesota Statutes Section 216B.1691

Docket No. E999/CI-13-542

INITIAL COMMENTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL LAW AND POLICY CENTER, FRESH ENERGY, AND IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA

On May 23, 2013, the Governor signed HF 729, the Solar Energy Jobs Act, which, among other things, enacted Minn. Stat. § 216B.1691 Subdivision 2f, the state's new solar energy standard ("SES") for public utilities. On December 30, 2013, the Commission issued a Notice inviting comments on four questions related to the implementation of the SES.

Fresh Energy is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in St. Paul working for a clean, fair and efficient energy system through good public policy. Fresh Energy was an active participant in the development of the solar energy legislation enacted in 2013, including the SES. In support of this legislation, Fresh Energy worked closely with the Clean Energy and Jobs Campaign, a coalition comprised of sixty citizen, outdoor recreation, rural, conservation, labor, faith, student, and business groups.

The Environmental Law and Policy Center ("ELPC") is a 501(c)(3) non-profit regional public interest environmental organization with staff located in seven Midwest states, including Minnesota, and is also a member of the Clean Energy and Jobs Campaign. ELPC's goals include promoting clean energy development and advocating for policies and practices that facilitate the use and development of clean energy.

The Izaak Walton League of America ("IWLA") is a national nonprofit 501(c)(3) conservation organization committed to protecting fish and wildlife, critical habitat, air, and water resources. IWLA has local chapters throughout the Midwest, including Minnesota. The Midwest Office of the IWLA, located in St. Paul, works on energy and air quality issues in an effort to conserve, restore, and promote the sustainable use and enjoyment of our natural resources.

COMMENTS

We appreciate that the Commission initiated this docket (along with its companion docket, 13-720), as a way to gather stakeholder input into a number of important questions. Careful implementation of the SES program, including consideration of solar renewable energy credit ("SREC") development in light of the state's current renewable energy credit ("REC") program, will help ensure that uniform standards apply across all effected utilities.

1. Should the Commission issue any clarifications on SREC shelf life?

Yes. The SES appears to clearly establish that SRECs generated by equipment installed during the period between August 31, 2013, and January 1, 2020, may count towards the SES 2020 compliance requirement.¹ But the SES does not explicitly spell out what happens to SRECs from equipment installed during that time period that are not applied to the 2020 compliance requirement. Can those SRECs live on forever, or do they have a shelf life after 2020?

We believe that clarification on this point may be necessary to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty for SREC generators and buyers in the pre-2020 timeframe, since the post-2020 treatment of "excess" SRECs (*i.e.*, any SRECs in surplus of the 2020 requirement) will inform the value of those SRECs at the pre-2020 time of generation.

We do not, at the present time, have a specific recommendation for what this clarification should be. As a general matter, however, we believe it is important to adopt rules that will drive increased solar installations and allow for and/or encourage near-term (pre-2020) SREC generation in excess of the 2020 compliance requirement. The Commission should also assign some "shelf-life" period to all eligible SRECs, as an unlimited shelf-life could frustrate the purpose of the SES: driving increased solar installations. Whatever SREC "shelf life" or other limitations on usage the Commission puts in place should also consider and support the value of SRECs in a voluntary and/or secondary SREC market.

In its deliberations, the Commission should also be mindful of the potential scenario in which the legislature establishes an additional, post-2020 SES compliance obligation.²

2. Should the Commission issue a clarification on the compliance enforcement provision's application to the SES?

Yes. The Commission should clarify that 216B.1691's compliance enforcement provision in Subd. 7 does apply to the SES.

The legislature plainly intended that the provisions governing Minnesota's RES also apply to the SES. Subd. 2f(b) states that "[t]he solar energy standard established in this subdivision is subject to all the provisions of this section governing a utility's standard obligation

¹ Minn. Stat. 216B.1691, Subd. 2f(f).

² For example, to help meet the state's "energy goal [that] by 2030, ten percent of the retail electric sales in Minnesota be generated by solar energy." Minn. Stat. 216B.1691, Subd. 2f(c).

under subdivision 2a." (Emphasis added.) The phrase "this section" refers to section 216B.1691 (*i.e.*, the statutory section in which Subd. 2f(b) is located). Thus, all of the provisions that "govern" utility RES obligations (*i.e.*, subdivision 2a obligations) under section 216B.1691 also apply to utility SES obligations, if logically relevant and not overridden by the provisions within Subd. 2f.³

Subd. 2f(b) is thus structured as a catch-all provision, making it unnecessary for the legislature to also amend the compliance provisions in Subd. 7 to add a specific reference to the new SES obligations. Subd. 7 is plainly a "provision," of section 216B.1691 "governing . . . subdivision 2a," as Subd. 7 states that "[t]he commission must regularly investigate whether an electric utility is in compliance with its . . . standard obligation under subdivision 2a." Therefore, Subd. 7 is covered by Subd. 2f(b)'s catch-all provision.

It also makes practical sense that the legislature intended to provide a compliance mechanism for the SES. The fact that the legislature included a compliance mechanism for the RES indicates that it believes an enforcement mechanism is a necessary component for an energy standard. Therefore, it makes sense that the legislature would include an enforcement provision for the SES, especially because it is modeled after the RES. Whereas a failure to include an enforcement mechanism for the SES would frustrate legislative intent, including such a mechanism would ensure that covered utilities will "generate or procure . . . at least 1.5 percent" of the utility's relevant energy sales from solar energy,⁴ thereby ensuring that legislative intent is fulfilled.

Therefore, the Commission should affirm that Subd. 7 applies to the SES.

3. What information should be provided in the utilities' annual reports on the SES?

Thanks to the legislative decision to require utilities to report annually on their progress towards the Solar Energy Standard (rather than bi-annually, as for the RES), we look forward to reviewing the first SES compliance reports in summer 2014.⁵

As a starting point, the information listed in Attachment 1, question 3(b) is a good list of information to include in the annual report. In general, we are satisfied with the general categories of information provided in the bi-annual RES reports.

There are, however, important differences between the SES and the RES that are relevant to reporting.

First, unlike the RES, the SES contains a 10 percent carve out for solar photovoltaic ("PV") systems sized under 20 kW.⁶ For this reason, utilities must separately track small-system

 $^{^{3}}$ For example, the bi-annual reporting requirement in Subd. 3 is overridden, as to the SES, by the annual reporting provision in Subd. 2f(g).

⁴ Minn. Stat. 216B.1691 Subd. 2f(a).

⁵ Minn. Stat. 216B.1691 Subd. 2f(g).

⁶ Minn. Stat. 216B.1691 Subd. 2f(a).

SRECs and report on their progress towards compliance with both the 10 percent carve out and the overall SES goal.

Second, there are relevant differences between the types of technology deployed and the installation location for SES- and RES-eligible resources, as described below. Additionally, for the SES, some of the eligible distributed generation systems must be installed behind the meter while the RES does not have the same interconnection distinction (with the exception of some net-metered wind systems under 40kW in size). As compared to utility-scale wind, solar PV projects are generally much smaller and much more numerous.

In terms of size, the Commission should expect to see projects ranging in size from the distributed generation maximum (10 MW) or larger, all the way down to 2 kW (*e.g.*, small residential rooftop system). To enable the Commission to effectively evaluate SES policy progress and solar market development, utilities should report relevant data separately for each relevant solar project category (potential categories are discussed further below.) Utilities should also comment in the report on the anticipated mix of project sizes that will be used for SES compliance.

For example, data could be broken out by contract type (net metering, value-of-solar tariff, community solar garden, utility owned, power purchase agreement) and by project capacity. Additionally, it may be important to separately track various project sizes, such as projects under 20 kW (*i.e.*, within the SES small-system carve out), from 20 kW to 1 MW (*e.g.*, net metering, solar tariff, or community solar projects), and above 1 MW. Our state may also see central station ("utility scale") solar projects, which may be relatively more analogous to utility-scale wind projects under the RES.

As stated, solar PV projects are also much more numerous than wind projects. One consequence, from a regulatory perspective, is that the market can and will generate many more data points for analysis. Leading solar states, such as Massachusetts, have developed systems to collect and analyze policy-relevant project-level data (*e.g.*, zip code, installed system costs, and project structure *i.e.*, customer-sited versus community solar). This approach allows regulators and policy makers to closely observe their state's fast-developing solar markets and identify cost-increasing barriers to deployment in a way that respects the legitimate privacy and competition concerns of market participants. The Commission may wish to include some of these data points among its reporting requirements for utilities.

Third, in solar contracts, the generator is often, though not always, a utility customerratepayer or possibly a contracting third-party owner. For many solar PV customer-generators (including those operating under Minnesota's net metering policy, which was recently strengthened by the state legislature⁷), the solar PV generation is also situated on the customer side of the meter. These differences may raise additional considerations not addressed under traditional RES reporting.

⁷ See 2013 amendments to Minn. Stat. 216B.164 Subd. 3a.

4. Should the Commission authorize an additional tracking system to track compliance with the SES?

We have no comment, at this time, on the need for an additional tracking system. This being said, we recognize that the Commission, in its deliberations in this proceeding, should consider the Midwest Renewable Energy Tracking System (M-RETS) currently in use for Minnesota's RES compliance and REC tracking.

At the same time, because the SES is a separate compliance obligation from the RES with a separate compliance mechanism (SRECs), the Commission should ensure that any tracking system approved can confirm the validity of SRECs within a larger compliance tracking system. In particular, a tracking system must be able to accurately track SES compliance, including compliance with the small-system carve out, and also accommodate the participation of small generators through no or low transaction costs.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide these initial comments to the Commission.

Very truly yours,

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STATE OF MINNESOTA FOR THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

In the Matter of Implementation of Solar Energy Standards Pursuant to the 2013 Amendments to Minnesota Statutes Section 216B.1691

AFFIDAVIT OF SERVICE

MPUC Docket No. E999/CI-13-542

STATE OF MINNESOTA))ss. COUNTY OF RAMSEY)

Leah Harms being duly sworn, says that on the 31st day of January, 2014 she served via U.S. mail and e-dockets the following:

• Initial Comments of Environmental Law and Policy Center, Fresh Energy, and Izaak Walton League of America

on the following persons, in this action, by filing through e-dockets or mailing to them a copy thereof, enclosed in an envelope, postage prepaid, and by depositing the same in the post office at St. Paul, Minnesota, directed to said persons at the last known mailing address of said persons:

Attached Service List.

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