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In hindsight, lawmakers accomplished sustainable goals

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Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski, early in 2009, remarked: "There is a green revolution stirring in America, and Oregon is the beating heart of that revolution. But it won't be for long if we call a time out on our move toward investing in renewable energy and green technology."

When unemployment is in double digits, legislators tend to focus, appropriately so, on increasing investment and helping businesses. So — with the benefit of hindsight — how did the folks in Salem do in balancing these goals?

Oregon's lawmakers passed an assortment of laws that promote sustainability, provide financing for renewable energy projects, and facilitate green job creation.

Lawmakers focused on a few bills that get directly at the governor's message of incentivizing investment in green technologies.

House Bill (HB) 2626, for example, requires the Oregon Department of Energy to establish an energy efficiency and sustainable technology loan program for small-scale renewable energy projects, and grants authority to local governments to issue bonds for private-energy efficiency projects.

HB 2190 extends the business energy tax credit to electric vehicle manufacturing facilities, but phases out the tax credits for hybrid gasoline-electric vehicles. These bills provide tax credits or favorable loan packages to promote green technologies.

HB 3039, meanwhile, develops a pilot program to integrate small-scale solar energy into Oregon's electricity mix using a feed-in tariff. Such a pilot program could eventually mean that homeowners and business owners could sell energy from solar panels back to the grid.

True, Senate Bill 80 — the governor's cap-and-trade bill, and arguably the single most high-profile climate change bill this session — failed to pass. The bill would have established a cap on greenhouse gas emissions in the state and allowed for the use of credits and trading of offsets to meet that cap obligation.

But a number of other laws intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions exemplify an innovative approach to securing Oregon's sustainable future while avoiding major impacts on Oregon businesses.

SB 101 establishes a greenhouse gas emissions performance standard, mandating that new long-term contracts for power require the power to come from a source at least as clean as natural gas. The standard effectively prohibits construction of any new coal-fired generation in the state but does not impact current facilities.

HB 2186 sets a low-carbon fuel standard that requires fuel providers to the transportation industry to alter the fuel mix that they sell into Oregon to reduce the intensity of greenhouse gas emissions. SB 79 increases the energy efficiency requirements of residential and commercial buildings over the next couple of years, and requires net zero emissions for new residential and commercial buildings by 2030.

All told, the laws that actually passed — from reducing carbon in fuel to increasing financing opportunities for renewable energy projects — should, to a significant extent, have a real impact.

Lawmakers quietly put together some valuable legislation that reflects the sustainable values of Oregonians, promotes green jobs, and protects our businesses and communities during these difficult economic times.

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