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Legislative hurdles for wind, solar

By Kate Galbraith, Texas Tribune Updated 10:56 pm, Friday, February 15, 2013

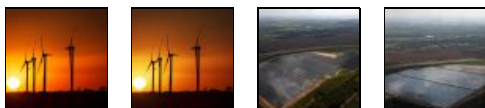
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The sun sets behind several 285ft tall 2.5 MW Clipper wind turbines at the BP Sherbino Mesa II Wind Farm, Monday, Feb. 20, 2012, in Fort Stockton. After cutting its solar program last year, BP is beefing up its investments into wind energy and recently launched its fourth Texas wind farm, in Fort Stockton. On 20,000 acres in Pecos County, the Sherbino II farm has 60 wind turbines to generate enough electricity to power more than 175,000 homes. Photo: Michael Paulsen, Houston Chronicle



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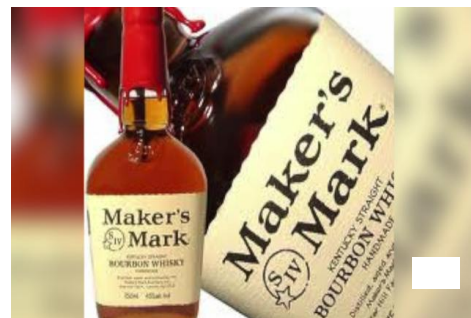
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During his State of the Union address on Tuesday, President Barack Obama doubled down on his vision for renewable energy, calling for more wind and solar power.

In Texas, the Legislature is less enthusiastic.

As the session progresses, renewable energy advocates are bracing to defend critical policies that have helped

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Texas become the leading wind-power state. The ascendancy of the tea party, an abundance of cheap natural gas and tighter budgets have reduced the sway of the wind industry. Solar power advocates anticipate limited gains at best.

Clean energy basked in political popularity about a decade ago, as wind farms sprouted atop West Texas mesas. In 2005, Gov. [Rick Perry](#) and lawmakers approved a mandate to build 5,880 megawatts of

renewable power capacity by 2015. They also backed the construction of billions of dollars' worth of transmission lines to reach wind farms.

But Texas' renewable energy push has “been eclipsed by the effect of fracking,” said Rep. [Mark Strama](#), D-Austin, referring to the drilling technology that prompted the natural gas boom.

The wind industry will focus on renewing a tax incentive for economic development known as Chapter 313. It allows wind farms to temporarily lower their property tax bills. The incentive, which also helps other industries, expires next year. Rep. [Craig Eiland](#), D-Texas City, has filed legislation, [House Bill 621](#), to renew it until 2024.

“If it's not renewed, my companies will be investing in Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska,” said [Jeffrey Clark](#), executive director of the [Wind Coalition](#), a regional advocacy group.

Wind groups also will guard against attacks on the renewable energy mandate. Last month, the [Public Utility Commission](#), which regulates the power industry, recommended that lawmakers repeal it. The commission's chairwoman, [Donna Nelson](#), has criticized wind power for straining the power grid, an assertion rejected by the industry.

With more than 12,000 megawatts of wind power and expectations of further growth thanks to Congress' recent extension of a crucial federal tax credit, Texas has long since met the mandate's requirements, so a repeal is arguably irrelevant. Advocates of wind power fear the symbolism of the move and the potential ramifications for a related system of renewable energy credits.

The precedent created by such a policy change would be “a really scary thing for the industry,” said [Colin Meehan](#), an official with the [Environmental Defense Fund](#).

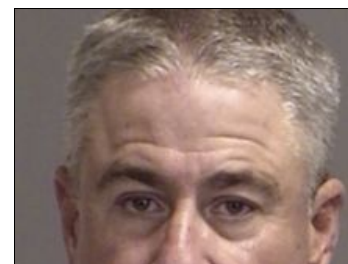
Conservatives disagree. “Wind is a very mature industry here in Texas, and it doesn't need those subsidies anymore,” said [Bill Peacock](#), director of the [Center for Economic Freedom](#) at the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#).

The anti-mandate mood bodes poorly for advocates of solar power, who have long sought a special “nonwind” requirement to help their technology. Nonetheless, Rep. [Rafael Anchia](#), D-Dallas, introduced HB 723, which would set a goal of 1,500 megawatts of nonwind renewable installations by 2022, a substantial amount. And Strama plans to introduce a bill that would ensure Texans with rooftop solar panels are paid if they put extra power (beyond what they use at home) on the electric grid.

Renewable energy groups also will emphasize their ability to deliver power that uses no water, which is especially important during a drought.

Advocates' greatest hopes may center on a program meant to make it easier for businesses to install solar panels or to improve energy and water efficiency. The idea is to allow property owners to pay for the improvements through higher property tax assessments, after borrowing the money initially. This strategy has several financing benefits.

Two powerful committee chairmen, Sen. [John Carona](#), R-Dallas, and Rep. [Jim Keffer](#), R-Granbury, have introduced bills to ease regulatory hurdles for businesses wanting to participate.

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The program is “an amazing economic development opportunity,” said [Charlene Heydinger](#), executive director of Keeping PACE in Texas, a group advocating for it.

The Death of the PC

The days of paying for costly software upgrades are numbered. The PC will soon be obsolete. And *BusinessWeek* reports 70% of Americans are already using the technology that will replace it. Merrill Lynch calls it “a \$160 billion tsunami.” Computing giants including IBM, Yahoo!, and Amazon are racing to be the first to cash in on this PC-killing revolution. Yet, a small group of little-known companies have a huge head start. Get the full details on these companies, and the technology that is destroying the PC, in a free video from The Motley Fool. Enter your email address below to view this stunning video.

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[A_Patriot](#) 10:25 AM on February 16, 2013

How about the fact it's too expensive to effectively generate power. Your only REAL options are "Nuclear". But....the progressives hate that one, and the NIMBY people will protest it.



Wind? Too flakey to depend on. Solar? You can only convert so much sunlight per square inch -- it will NEVER get more efficient.

REPLY (4) (1) POPULARITY: 3 [Report Abuse]

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thump 9:15 AM on February 16, 2013

I think wind turbines & solar panels are AWESOME, if you want to PAY for them YOURSELF. The turbines in west Texas have RUINED miles of otherwise beautiful landscape in my personal opinion.

I say we stick a turbine where the sun dont shine on the muslim in charge.

REPLY (4) (2) POPULARITY: 2 [Report Abuse]

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LarsSA 8:52 PM on February 16, 2013

These power lines from west Texas to liberals in Austin and San Antonio are destroying the beauty of rural Texas (Hill Country) and untold damage to the environment. "Big Wind" is a financial and environmental disaster. The cost to tax payers is huge with little to show. They do make good conversation at liberal cocktail parties.

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