

'Net metering' bill could spur alternative energy systems

By [ADRIANA COLINDRES](#)

STATE CAPITOL BUREAU

State Journal-Register

*Published Saturday, April 14, 2007*

Dan Mathis of Tremont has a keen, longtime interest in alternative sources of energy, such as the sun and the wind, and their potential to generate electricity in an environmentally friendly way.

"A lot of people gripe about the wind," Mathis said. "Well, I get excited about it when it's windy because that's a lot of stored energy right there that can be harnessed with a turbine."

Mathis, 50, would like to install an alternative energy system on his small Tazewell County farm, utilizing solar cells and a small wind turbine. But that would be expensive - about \$15,000 to \$20,000.

"Most of us, you know, we like to save the environment and so forth," he said. "But when it really comes down to it ... the reason I haven't installed one yet is because the payback's not there."

Mathis believes that could change if state lawmakers approve Senate Bill 680, which sailed through the Senate on a 57-0 vote last month and is pending in the House.

The legislation would require electricity providers, such as the Ameren Illinois utilities and Commonwealth Edison, to provide "net metering" to retail customers who have an electrical generating system powered by the sun, the wind or another renewable energy source. The generating system, which could have a rated capacity of up to 2,000 kilowatts, would have to be on the customer's property and intended mainly to offset the customer's power needs.

"What this does is give you one (electric) meter that has the ability to turn forwards or backwards at the same ratio," Mathis said. "Say you use 100 watts of electricity one day, and you manufacture 100 watts. Well, your bill would be zero."

If the alternative energy system produced more electricity than its owner could use in one day, "you could bank (the excess amount) away for another day," he said. Another possibility would be to sell the excess power to an electricity provider.

With statewide net-metering standards such as those proposed in SB 680,

people with alternative energy systems might be able to pay them off in eight to 10 years, which is much more quickly than they could right now, Mathis said.

“What this bill really does is it opens up (the use of alternative energy) to the individual resident and small businesses, all the way up to the size of a Wal-Mart, that want to generate enough electricity to meet their own needs,” he said.

Ameren Corp. spokesman Leigh Morris said the company does not oppose net metering, but it opposes SB 680 and views it as too far-reaching, partly because of the 2,000-kilowatt cap on generating facilities.

“That’s an enormous amount,” Morris said. “That’s industrial class.”

In addition, Morris said, that legislation would require the utility to bear the costs of installing the proper metering system. In effect, he said, other customers would subsidize the customers who choose net metering.

Another piece of legislation dealing with net metering, House Bill 1011, “is a much different bill,” and Ameren has taken a neutral position on it, Morris said.

That measure easily cleared the House on a 116-0 vote last month, advancing to the Senate for consideration. It would apply to wind- or solar-powered generating facilities with a capacity of up to 40 kilowatts.

It also would require net-metering customers to install the necessary two-way metering and other controls, Morris said.

Commonwealth Edison spokesman Thomas Stevens sent an e-mailed response to a question about what that company thinks of the net-metering proposals.

“ComEd is committed to the continued development of renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar power, in Illinois,” the statement said. “ComEd is working with the key stakeholders of both bills to achieve that result.”

Mark Burger, president of the Illinois Solar Energy Association, said the net-metering issue is important “because we are in the midst of a technological revolution in terms of power generation.”

Solar and wind systems are a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry, he said, so a good net-metering standard is one of the components that are “critical to encourage the growth of these industries and the new businesses and jobs

they can create.”

“This is jobs as much as a cleaner environment,” Burger added.

Sen. Michael Bond, a Grayslake Democrat who is the lead Senate sponsor for SB 680 and HB 1011, said he is optimistic lawmakers this spring will send a net-metering measure to the governor for his signature.

“The rising rate of energy costs in Illinois is astonishing. Part of that is due to coming out of a 10-year (electricity) rate freeze,” Bond said. “I think we need to do everything within our power as a General Assembly to empower and help people reduce their energy costs.”

Adriana Colindres can be reached at 782-6292 or

[adriana.colindres@sj-r.com](mailto:adriana.colindres@sj-r.com).

---