

Women in Power

Energy's rising stars gather in D.C. to discuss renewables



By Bart Taylor, publisher of ColoradoBiz magazine. Posted 10.28.2009

With renewable energy at the top of the agenda, Denver law firm Patton Boggs LLP hosted the 6th annual Women in Power forum last week at its Washington, D.C. offices.

More than 100 women representing various public and private energy-related entities attended. Colorado's delegation included Carol Tombari, manager of stakeholder relations at the U.S. Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory; Theresa Donahue, executive director, Smart Energy Living Alliance; and Carolyn McIntosh, partner at Patton Boggs LLP and a specialist in energy, natural resources and environmental litigation.

Federal Energy Regulatory Commissioner Suedeen Kelly keynoted the event, closing a day-long series of presentations and breakout sessions that left little doubt that the philosophical discussion about renewable energy is evolving into a full-on tactical dialogue about the development, transmission and regulation of sustainable solutions.

Among the themes that emerged:

- Renewable Energy Portfolio Standards (RES), such as the 20 percent renewable mandate for utilities Colorado voters recently approved, are gaining ground: 31 states now have some form of RES. The standards have proved to be a catalyst for research and development in renewable segments and for regulatory reform within agencies that oversee energy development and distribution. On balance, the attendees seem to have successfully taken up the public's challenge to embrace the proliferation of renewable options while keeping pace with regulatory issues – if not without some pain.
- In fact, select governmental entities have become case studies in progressive energy thinking. The poster child mentioned most: the Department of Defense. Seems the military has established some of the most aggressive renewable standards currently shaping policy anywhere in the country.
- Stimulus dollars are proving critical in driving renewable energy development. Sustaining the financial support is the issue on everyone's mind, and several participants argued passionately for permanent extension of capital and tax incentives provided for in the Recovery and Reinvestment Act Of 2009 — incentives which they believe simply level the playing field with traditional oil and gas industries.
- Cap and Trade legislation, part of the more comprehensive “energy bill” pending in Congress, was a hot topic. Speakers and panelists suggested that the lack of a national policy on carbon, including ongoing uncertainty around carbon pricing, was causing the most angst. Relief may not come soon, however; representatives from both sides of the Congressional aisle told the forum that the legislation was now teed up behind health care and Wall Street reform legislation.
- Think nuclear is an emerging option in the West? Not so in Montana, where attendees were informed by state Public Service Commissioner Gail Gutsche that nuclear power is prohibited by statute. NREL's Carol Tombari also suggested the region's increasingly acute water supply issues might act as a deterrent given nuclear energy's intensive water needs.
- Wind and solar continue to dominate the national discussion on renewable energy development, with substantial — and frankly, surprising — product development and regulatory reform. The fruits of this progress are likely coming to a grid near you, and sooner than you think.

Those attending the Women in Power forum would likely agree that a fundamental cultural shift is occurring around the renewable energy discussion.

For more information on the Women in Power forum, please contact Carolyn McIntosh, CMcIntosh@PattonBoggs.com.