

TO: Senate Select Committee on Clean Energy
FROM: Peter Bakken, Coordinator for Public Policy
Wisconsin Council of Churches
RE: Clean Energy Jobs Act (SB 450 and AB 649)
DATE: February 11, 2010

My Name is Peter Bakken. I'm the Public Policy Coordinator for the Wisconsin Council of Churches, an association of thirteen Protestant and Christian Orthodox denominations in Wisconsin, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopal Church. Together, we comprise some 3000 congregations and almost a million members, and reach every corner of this state.

I am here to speak in support of the Clean Energy Jobs Act.

Across Wisconsin, churches and other faith communities have taken measures to reduce their use of fossil fuels by conserving energy, installing energy-efficient equipment, and adopting clean renewable energy sources.

Three Wisconsin churches have received EPA's Energy Star Congregations Awards for their achievements in energy conservation – Saint Andrews Lutheran church in Wausau, St. Therese Catholic Church in Appleton, and Madison Christian Community. Many more Wisconsin congregations have been featured in local and church media: First Presbyterian Church (Marshfield), First Unitarian Society (Madison), Christ the Servant Lutheran Church (Waukesha), Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Green Bay, Saint Matthew Lutheran Church (Wauwatosa), Unitarian Universalist Church West (Brookfield), Lake Park Lutheran Church (Milwaukee), and Unity Lutheran Church (Milwaukee) – to name only a few.

They have done so for reasons that are highly relevant to the legislation we are discussing here today.

One reason is simply to exercise good stewardship by saving money. Congregations like businesses, households, and governments have finite budgets, and better things to spend money on than energy bills. These congregations have recognized that a short-term investment to reduce energy consumption yields long term returns that will enable them to better minister to their members and serve their neighbors in need.

In the same way, the Clean Energy Jobs bill can benefit the individuals, businesses, and communities of Wisconsin by promoting conservation and energy efficiency, ultimately lowering overall energy costs reducing the amount of money we send out of state by importing coal and oil to meet our energy needs.

A deeper motivation for these communities of faith, however, is to help secure a cleaner, healthier, and more just world for present and future generations. Our reliance on fossil fuels threatens the health of our most vulnerable neighbors today: neurological damage from mercury released into the atmosphere by the burning of coal; asthma from air pollutants; water poisoned by coal mining waste from mountaintop removal in Appalachia; toxic wastelands from the exploitation of Canadian oil sands; and so on. These are real and present costs that are not accounted for by our current system of energy pricing.

Further, it is clear that the projected consequences of climate change will fall most heavily on the poorest of the global poor, who have done the least to create the problem and who lack the resources to adapt to increases in drought, flooding, heat waves, sea level rise, and infectious diseases.

In short, these communities of faith have taken steps to reduce their energy consumption because it is the right thing to do – not only for the sake of maintaining the beauty, stability, and integrity of the creation, but also as a matter of justice for the least powerful and prosperous of our brothers and sisters.

The Clean Energy Jobs bill provides an opportunity for promoting justice as well as health here at home, provided we take steps to enable low-income people in Wisconsin to share in the economic benefits of a new clean energy economy. We therefore support the concerns of the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association that the final bill include measures to restore and protect the utility public benefits fund, and to help make new alternative energy and energy efficiency jobs pathways out of poverty.

Actions by a single congregation to employ renewable energy sources or conserve energy may not seem to amount to much, but this brings us to a final reason why people of faith have found it worthwhile to do so. As congregations – and households, communities, and even states – step forward to take constructive action, they set in motion the beneficial social contagion of exemplary leadership.

Exemplary leadership informs the imagination by showing that a better way is possible, that we have gifts of creativity and innovation that can leave a better world and a better way of life for our children and future generations.

Exemplary leadership removes the excuse of those who insist on waiting until others have taken the first step, by taking that step oneself. It recognizes that the actions of a single congregation, or state, are not taken in a vacuum. They are not sufficient in themselves, but they are part of a larger process of change. In taking responsibility for our own impact on the world, however limited, we influence the actions and perceptions of others.

The Clean Energy Jobs Act will demonstrate Wisconsin's determination to exercise exemplary leadership and the commitment of American citizens to take constructive action to solve our economic and environmental problems. We therefore respectfully urge this committee to recommend passage of SB 450.

Thank you for your time and your attention.