Doing More With Less Energy

The cheapest electricity is the electricity you don’t use.

Each year, legislators enact about 100 efficiency-related bills, and this year was no different.

States have a range of energy efficiency policies to choose from—setting building-efficiency or reporting requirements, creating efficiency targets or incentives, designating sales tax holidays for buying efficient appliances and enacting various financing and funding initiatives. This year, examples can be found across the nation.

Nevada lawmakers enacted five efficiency-related bills this session, including initiatives for low-income customers and annual energy-savings targets for utilities.

Nevada lawmakers also established a Clean Energy Fund, which is similar to a “green” or energy bank. The fund seeks to increase the pace and volume of financing for energy efficiency, renewable energy, demand response and alternatively fueled vehicle projects.

The Virginia Assembly authorized cities to create green development zones in which businesses receive tax incentives if they operate in energy-efficient buildings or produce environmentally friendly products.

In Maryland, newly passed legislation requires electric utilities to save 2 percent of energy annually through cost-effective energy efficiency, through 2023.

Vermont lawmakers enacted federal appliance and lighting efficiency standards in state statute.

Since efficiency decreases energy sales and, in turn, utilities’ profits, Montana legislators authorized a study of utility decoupling—a separation of utility profits from total electricity or gas sales, which eliminates the financial disincentive for utilities to invest in efficiency.

To streamline projects and improve quality assurance, lawmakers in Mississippi authorized the state’s Division of Energy to compile a list of prequalified contractors that can guarantee energy savings through efficiency improvement contracts.

The spotlight on energy efficiency shows no sign of burning out anytime soon.

—Jocelyn Durkay

Hey, Kids, Tobacco Can Wait

If young people continue to smoke at the current rate, about one in 13 Americans who are currently 17 years old or younger will die early from a smoking-related illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That’s 5.6 million of today’s young people.

To reduce the use of tobacco among young people, Oregon recently joined California, Hawaii, Maine and New Jersey in raising the age for buying tobacco to 21.

Under Oregon’s bill, sponsored by Representative Rich Vial (R), store clerks face fines ranging from $50 to $1,000 if they sell tobacco products or vapes to anyone under age 21. Keeping tobacco from adults under 21 is about saving lives and money, Vial told The Oregonian. State residents spend more than $3 billion a year treating their tobacco-related illnesses, he said.

The bill had bipartisan support—and bipartisan opposition. Calling it a case of government overreach, some lawmakers voted against the bill because they said it infringed on citizens’ rights to use a legal product. It’s not the role of government to regulate unhealthy conduct, they argued.

Three-quarters of adults favor raising the minimum tobacco age of sale to 21 years, including 70 percent of smokers, according to a 2015 study in the Journal of Preventive Medicine. Advocates for raising the smoking age to 21, believe stopping, or at least delaying, people from trying tobacco when they are young may prevent them from becoming addicted later. Nearly nine in 10 cigarette smokers say they started smoking before they were 18, and 99 percent say they were smoking by age 26, according to the CDC.

—Magazine staff