

Walker bill puts \$500 million in wind turbine investment at risk

1,800-foot setback requirement would halt most projects

By [Thomas Content](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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About \$500 million in investment in renewable energy over the next two years could be at risk if lawmakers approve Gov. Scott Walker's wind turbine siting bill.

The bill, praised by some as a strong defense of property rights, would erect the biggest hurdle to wind farm development in the nation, industry leaders said Friday.

"This will be the biggest regulatory barrier in terms of setbacks in the country," said Denise Bode, chief executive of the American Wind Energy Association, based in Washington, D.C. "You're adding a new regulatory barrier and putting a 'closed for business' sign on Wisconsin for wind development."

A restrictive environment for wind development would create a chilling effect for companies that manufacture parts for wind turbines and want to open plants in the state, following the lead of firms such as TowerTech in Manitowoc and Ingeteam, which is building a factory in the Menomonee River Valley.

Many states have no setback requirements, deferring to local units of government. Of those that do, none has a setback from turbines as deep as Wisconsin's new proposal, Bode said.

Walker's bill, proposed as part of a regulatory reform package, would mandate minimum setbacks of 1,800 feet between a wind turbine and the nearest property line. That compares with a setback of 1,250 feet from a neighboring residence approved by the Public Service Commission in a rule adopted last year and set to take effect this year.

Tom Larson, chief lobbyist for the Wisconsin Realtors Association, said the proposal is needed to protect homeowners who live near wind turbines.

"We think that with this bill Wisconsin would be the only state in the country to have an adequate setback for property owners," Larson said.

The problem is with the choice of locations, said Bob Welch, who represents a coalition of local groups that have mobilized against wind farm developments.

"The real issue is, if you were siting wind turbines in the kinds of places where they belong - like the wheat fields of North Dakota - then Walker's provision wouldn't affect you at all," said Welch, a former legislator who is spokesman for the Coalition for Wisconsin Environmental Stewardship.

During his campaign for governor last year, Walker vowed to streamline Wisconsin's regulatory system to be more business-friendly and sympathetic to property owners.

In a meeting with the editorial board of the Journal Sentinel on Wednesday, Walker said he's heard a lot of worries about siting wind farms.

"There is a fair amount of concern from individual residents in these areas where you see an abundance of wind farms being put up," Walker said. "This is about giving them more control in that process - something they felt was lacking by the previous legislation and by the PSC's regulations."

But Walker's proposal is so strict it would stall development across the state, said Michael Vickerman, executive director of Renew Wisconsin, an advocacy group that has tracked the growth of the state's renewable sector.

A total of \$1.8 billion in investment may be at stake if every wind farm now in the planning stage in the state is halted. About \$500 million of that investment is at risk over the next two years from projects poised to start construction, he said.

"There are very few locations in the entire Badger State that could overcome such extreme constraints," Vickerman said. "You can count the locations on the fingers of one hand."

Generating controversy

Wind farm development in Wisconsin has generated more controversy than in other states because the areas most suitable for wind turbines are more densely populated than rural expanses of Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas.

Opposition to wind farms led some counties to enact wind power moratoriums and other restrictive rules. The patchwork of local rules stalled projects, prompting the Legislature to call on the PSC to set a statewide standard.

Bode said the industry wasn't pleased with - but could live with - the standard that was adopted by the PSC.

Dan Ebert, who chairs the state's wind siting advisory council, said the end result wasn't perfect, but did a better job at balancing the competing interests than Walker's bill does.

"We shouldn't have the Realtors Association dictating energy policy in this state," said Ebert, senior vice president at WPPI Energy in Sun Prairie. "This puts a stake through the heart of wind development in the state of Wisconsin."

The proposed rule is more aggressive than the PSC rule because it would cover large utility-scale wind farms as well as smaller wind farms, he said.

The rule also would affect projects that have received a permit but have not yet begun construction. That includes a two-turbine project planned by Organic Valley Cooperative and Gunderson Lutheran in Cashton, near La Crosse, as well as a 99-megawatt project in Lafayette County and several others, Ebert said.

We Energies' wind farm in Columbia County, Glacier Hills Wind Park, which is under construction, would not be affected by the bill. But future projects that are required to meet the state renewable power mandate would be affected.

If it did apply to the We Energies project, the utility would need waivers to build all but one of the 90 turbines that are now under construction, Andy Hesselbach, We Energies project manager, told the siting council last summer.

Projects, jobs on hold

Contractors that work on wind farms were disappointed in Walker's bill.

Wondra Construction of Iron Ridge in Dodge County has laid off 30 of its 35 workers as wind development work has slowed. The company worked on the Butler Ridge wind farm in Dodge County in 2008 and worked on a big wind farm in Pennsylvania last year, and has been looking forward to bidding on more projects in Wisconsin.

"Everything's in a holding pattern right now," said Roger Thimm, Wondra's co-owner. "You've got people who want to invest money in the state, and there are people that are against that. That's fine, but they shouldn't have veto rights over economic development."

Meanwhile, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) said Friday he wants to deal with all the issues the governor has included in a regulatory reform bill, but not as one package.

[Walker's bill](#) would change rules on siting wind turbines, make it easier to build on wetlands in Brown County and give the governor more power in writing administrative rules.


Fitzgerald said he supported all those ideas but said they should be dealt with separately.

The Legislature had the Public Service Commission develop rules on wind turbines, but lawmakers need to revisit the issue, Fitzgerald said. "I think that it is something that the Legislature should go back and look at again," he said.

Lee Bergquist and Patrick Marley of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

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