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California passes 100% clean energy bill, but punts on several plans for getting there

Sammy Roth, Palm Springs Desert Sun Published 6:00 a.m. PT Sept. 6, 2018



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(Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

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California lawmakers passed a bill last week requiring the state to get 100 percent of its electricity from climate-friendly sources like solar and wind.


But they didn't vote on several proposals designed to help California achieve that goal, including a plan backed by Gov. Jerry Brown to connect the power grids of as many as 14 western states, as well as a bill that would have promoted geothermal energy development at the Salton Sea. The geothermal bill might have passed, if not for last-minute opposition from state Sen. Jeff Stone, a Republican who represents the Coachella Valley.

The Legislature did pass a bill that would help homes and businesses install batteries, which can help reduce planet-warming emissions when paired with rooftop solar panels. That bill awaits a signature from Gov. Brown, as does the 100 percent clean energy bill.

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Here's a breakdown of which energy bills did and didn't pass in the final days of the 2018 legislative session, which ended Friday night at midnight.

Assembly Bill 813: Regional power grid

AB 813 would have allowed California to launch a regional energy market by expanding its power grid system to other western states. Gov. Brown has been [pushing lawmakers to approve the concept since 2015](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/energy/2017/02/01/caiso-pacificcorp-california-solar-wind/96201888/) ([/story/tech/science/energy/2017/02/01/caiso-pacificcorp-california-solar-wind/96201888/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/energy/2017/02/01/caiso-pacificcorp-california-solar-wind/96201888/)), based on the argument that it would allow clean energy to cross state lines more easily and reduce the costs of fighting climate change. California, for instance, would be able to import cheap wind energy from Wyoming or hydropower from Washington, while selling its own excess solar power to other states.

POWER THE WEST: [In Wyoming wind, conservative billionaire sees California's future](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/energy/2017/02/01/wyoming-wind-philip-anschut/95452488/) ([/story/tech/science/energy/2017/02/01/wyoming-wind-philip-anschut/95452488/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/energy/2017/02/01/wyoming-wind-philip-anschut/95452488/))

REGIONAL GRID: [Would AB 813 have helped coal plants or the solar industry?](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/16/would-california-bill-ab-813-help-coal-plants-solar-industry/993198002/) ([/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/16/would-california-bill-ab-813-help-coal-plants-solar-industry/993198002/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/16/would-california-bill-ab-813-help-coal-plants-solar-industry/993198002/))

9/6/2018 California approves 100% climate-friendly energy, punts on other bills
But critics worry a regional power grid [could have the unintended side effect](https://www.desertsun.com/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/16/would-california-bill-ab-813-help-coal-plants-solar-industry/993198002/) of forcing California to buy power from coal plants in Utah and Wyoming, especially if the Trump administration tries to interfere with the interstate market. That argument proved too powerful for supporters of AB 813 to overcome. State Senate leader Toni Atkins [tweeted](https://twitter.com/SenToniAtkins/status/1035726086829629440) Friday night that the bill "will not be moved to the Senate Floor for a vote this year."

"We will continue this important discussion next year," Atkins wrote.

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The moon shines over a solar plant near the southern end of the Salton Sea, in California's Imperial Valley, on Nov. 23, 2015. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Ralph Cavanagh from the Natural Resources Defense Council lamented the bill's failure, arguing that "the need for western grid integration grows more obvious each day."

"California's wind and solar generation are growing faster than our inefficiently managed electric grid can put them to use. We're literally throwing away pollution-free electricity during certain periods, and the problem will only get worse," Cavanagh said.

Several major environmental groups supported AB 813, but others were opposed, including the Sierra Club and Food and Water Watch. Adam Scow, California director for Food and Water Watch, praised Atkins for not bringing the legislation to a floor vote.

"California remains in control of its energy destiny and may now proceed with getting to 100 percent renewable energy without outside interference," Scow said.

Senate Bill 100: 100% clean energy

California already has one of the most ambitious clean energy targets in the country, which is to get 50 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030. Last week, lawmakers passed a bill to [increase the target to 60 percent renewable energy by 2030 and 100 percent carbon-free energy by 2045](https://www.desertsun.com/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/28/california-lawmakers-pass-100-clean-energy-bill-kevin-de-leon/1123626002/), the difference being that the long-term target could include non-renewable resources like nuclear and large hydropower.

SB 100 was written by state Sen. Kevin de León, a Los Angeles Democrat who is campaigning to unseat U.S. Senate Dianne Feinstein in the November election. De León first introduced SB 100 in 2017. The legislation might have passed last year, if Gov. Brown hadn't insisted lawmakers also approve AB 813, the regional power grid bill.

This year, de León convinced lawmakers to consider SB 100 on its own merits. The bill was [approved by a 44-33 vote in the Assembly and a 25-13 vote in the Senate](https://www.desertsun.com/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/28/california-lawmakers-pass-100-clean-energy-bill-kevin-de-leon/1123626002/).

"The 5th largest economy in the world is one step closer to a zero-carbon, 100% clean energy future," de León [wrote](https://twitter.com/kdeleon/status/1034980587809824768) on Twitter following the legislation's passage.

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There's been speculation in Sacramento that Gov. Brown may not sign SB 100, either because he's unhappy about the failure of AB 813 or because the bill would give de León a powerful talking point in his bid to defeat Feinstein, an ally of Brown's. But for Brown not to sign SB 100 would be seen as a dramatic rejection of his own carefully [cultivated legacy as a global leader on climate change](#). [\(story/news/environment/2015/11/14/paris-climate-talks-nations-look-california/75540806/\)](#). The governor is scheduled to co-chair an international climate action summit in San Francisco starting September 12.



In this July 13, 2017 file photo, Gov. Jerry Brown, left, flanked by Kevin de León, urges members of the California Senate's Environmental Quality Committee to approve a pair of bills to extend the state's cap-and-trade program. (Photo: Rich Pedroncelli, AP)

Assembly Bill 893: Geothermal mandate

California lawmakers came closer than ever to passing a bill that would require utility companies to buy electricity from geothermal power plants, which could be an economic boon for Imperial County communities near the southern shore of the Salton Sea. But AB 893 — which also would have benefited the solar, wind and biomass energy industries — didn't get a vote in the Assembly or Senate despite a last-minute push by the legislation's author, Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia, a Coachella Democrat.

The Salton Sea is [home to one of the world's most powerful geothermal hot spots](#) [\(story/tech/science/energy/2016/05/05/salton-sea-dreaming-big-geothermal/83845318/\)](#), and Imperial County officials have long argued that geothermal development would generate jobs and income in a region with high poverty and unemployment rates. There are already a dozen geothermal facilities in the area, but development has [largely stalled over the past two decades](#) [\(story/tech/science/energy/2016/05/05/salton-sea-dreaming-big-geothermal/83845318/\)](#), due to the high up-front costs of building a geothermal plant.

Garcia came closer than previous lawmakers to getting a geothermal mandate through the Legislature. He [added provisions to his bill that also would have required utilities to buy additional solar and wind power by the end of 2019](#) [\(story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/21/california-energy-bill-would-require-more-solar-wind-and-geothermal/1052396002/\)](#), before federal tax credits begin to expire. The solar and wind industries joined geothermal advocates in supporting the bill, which cleared the Senate Appropriations Committee in a 5-2 vote last month.

ENERGY FIGHT: [Trump administration says it wants more solar in California desert](#) [\(story/tech/science/energy/2018/04/18/trump-vs-california-environmental-fight-nobodys-talking/499467002/\)](#)

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But AB 893 was never brought up for a full vote, which Garcia attributed to procedural issues. The bill was amended several times in the final week of session, and it ultimately needed a special rules waiver to move forward. But the waiver required a two-thirds vote in the state Senate, and Garcia said there weren't any Republicans willing to support the bill. He singled out his Republican colleague Jeff Stone, who represents the Coachella Valley in the state Senate and has generally been supportive of renewable energy.

"We just couldn't get any help from a Republican," Garcia said.

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Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella, speaks at the Southern California Energy and Water Summit in Palm Springs. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Stone told The Desert Sun he considered voting for the waiver but was dissuaded by lobbying from the California Chamber of Commerce and electric utilities, including Sempra Energy, the parent company of San Diego Gas & Electric. Stone said he was told by the utilities that AB 893 could raise electric bills as much as \$2 billion statewide.

"We're the highest-taxed citizens in the country, with the highest utility bills," Stone said. "I represent a lot of people who can't afford a \$5 or \$15 increase in their utility bills."

Veteran energy lobbyist V. John White said he thinks Garcia will keep building support for geothermal. White, who runs the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, said Garcia "has established himself as a player on all of these issues."

"I think with Kevin de León leaving the Legislature, that Eddy Garcia is the logical successor as one of the leading clean energy legislators," White said.

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EnergySource's Featherstone geothermal plant by the Salton Sea belches steam on April 29, 2016, with mud pots in the foreground. (Photo: Robert Hopwood/The Desert Sun)

Assembly Bill 2787: Hydropower in the desert

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One of the most controversial proposals for helping California add more clean energy is the Eagle Mountain hydropower project, which would be built just outside Joshua Tree National Park. Supporters have argued Eagle Mountain can act as "pumped storage," absorbing excess energy from California's solar and wind farms when there's more sunlight or wind than consumers need, then sending that energy back into the grid when the sun goes down or the wind stops blowing. There's widespread agreement among experts that storage is key to building more solar and wind farms in California, and Eagle Mountain supporters say the project would be a cost-effective form of storage.

AB 2787 was sponsored by NextEra Energy Resources, one of the companies developing the Eagle Mountain project. The bill would have [required utilities to sign contracts for "pumped storage" projects, almost certainly including Eagle Mountain \(/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/24/california-could-bail-out-eagle-mountain-hydropower-joshua-tree/1075441002/\)](#). The legislation was opposed by environmentalists, who say the desert hydropower project would drain a sensitive groundwater aquifer and hurt ecosystems in the national park.

JOSHUA TREE: [Trump administration approves Eagle Mountain hydropower project \(/story/news/environment/2018/08/01/trump-approves-energy-project-outside-joshua-tree-national-park/884323002/\)](#).

FROM 2014: [In shadow of Joshua Tree National Park, debating an old mine's future \(/story/news/environment/2014/11/20/eagle-mountain-mine-joshua-tree-future/70013970/\)](#).

The legislation was co-authored by several desert lawmakers who received thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from NextEra, including Democrat Eduardo Garcia and Republicans Chad Mayes and Jeff Stone. But after [clearing two Senate committees \(/story/tech/science/energy/2018/08/27/california-advances-bill-supporting-desert-hydropower-joshua-tree/1114481002/\)](#) in the final days of the legislative session, AB 2787 was never brought up for a floor vote.

The bill's author was Assemblymember Bill Quirk. His chief of staff, Tomasa Dueñas, said she doesn't know whether Quirk will bring back a similar proposal next year.

"With the end of session just hours away and a number of critical fire and energy related bills competing to make it across the finish line, we realized there wasn't sufficient time to give AB 2787 the attention it deserves," Dueñas said in an email.

Environmentalists have criticized the Eagle Mountain developers for their plan to pump billions of gallons of groundwater from the Chuckwalla Valley aquifer, on a property as close as 1.5 miles to the edge of the Joshua Tree National Park. But Garcia defended his decision to support AB 2787. He said he's visited the Eagle Mountain project site, which he described as "environmentally disturbed" due to decades of iron mining. He also said the site isn't as close to the national park as some critics have made it out to be.

"There were concerns that were highlighted (with AB 2787). But I think it was a good proposal, and we'll see what happens in the coming year," Garcia said. "We know there's a call for storage projects to bring forward some reliability to the grid system."

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An open pit that was used for iron mining in the Eagle Mountain area, near Joshua Tree National Park. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Senate Bill 700: Energy storage incentives

Most of the energy bills being debated in Sacramento this year involved utility-scale projects like big solar and wind farms, geothermal facilities and power lines.

SB 700, which was written by state Sen. Scott Wiener, focused on small-scale clean energy. The bill would extend through 2024 the Self-Generation Incentive Program, which provides financial incentives for homes and businesses to install battery systems that complement their rooftop solar panels. The program is available to customers of Southern California Edison, Pacific Gas & Electric and San Diego Gas & Electric.

WATER: [Bill targeting Cadiz's plan to pump desert groundwater dies in state Senate \(/story/news/environment/2018/08/31/bill-would-hinder-cadiz-water-project-stalls-california-senate/1158059002/\)](#)

CLIMATE: [Tourism could suffer in Coachella Valley as global temperatures rise \(/story/news/environment/2018/08/27/climate-change-bringing-hotter-temperatures-californias-deserts/1088591002/\)](#)

Supporters say SB 700 would authorize more than \$800 million in incentives and support the installation of 3,000 megawatts of energy storage. Lawmakers approved the bill last week, with the Assembly voting 57-18 and the Senate voting 25-12 in favor.

"SB 700 will do for storage what SB 1 did for solar over a decade ago, namely create a mainstream market by driving up demand and driving down costs, all while creating jobs and clean energy choices for consumers," said Bernadette Del Chiaro, executive director of the California Solar and Storage Association, an industry trade group.

A spokesperson for Gov. Brown wouldn't comment on SB 700. Brown's office typically declines to discuss legislation pending before the governor, even bills he intends to sign.

The deadline for Brown to sign bills into law is September 30.

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