

SUNY, private campuses band together to purchase renewable electricity

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ALBANY — A coalition of 21 higher education campuses in New York plans to make big investments in renewables, a move that would support the energy goals of both Gov. Andrew Cuomo and SUNY Chancellor Kristina Johnson.

The coalition, called New York Campus Aggregate Renewable Energy Solution, or NYCARES, is hiring a consultant to assist with power purchase agreements for renewable projects to supply each campus. Johnson said she expects the consultant to be selected by the end of the year.

Johnson, who previously worked in President Barack Obama's Energy Department, has [made](#) cutting emissions and energy use at SUNY a key part of her agenda since becoming chancellor in 2016. The governor's office has welcomed her proposals as it seeks to accelerate Cuomo's goal of 40 percent emissions reduction and 50 percent renewables by 2030.

Johnson said she wants the SUNY campuses to reach 100 percent renewable electricity by 2020, although she has not mandated that goal because it may take longer to complete the process.

"I still want to be [at 100 percent renewable] way before 2030," Johnson said, citing the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that called for a much faster reduction in greenhouse gas emissions than previous goals. "It just picks up the urgency — for us who can, we have to do. ... First, let's decarbonize electricity — should be an easy lift, let's do it, plus it will give a market signal [for renewable energy]."

The NYCARES coalition includes 16 SUNY campuses across the state, Cornell University (which has three state-supported colleges affiliated with SUNY) and four private independent colleges. SUNY has 64 campuses across the state, and the consultant hired by the consortium is expected to evaluate the energy needs of all of them.

Johnson said campuses already were interested in purchasing renewables when she started as chancellor, and she fully backed the idea.

"I came in and I said, 'You know, when [the New York Power Authority] has 75 percent of its energy as hydropower ... gosh, this should be pretty easy to decarbonize our electric sector,'" she said.

New York has struggled to meet statewide goals for renewable electricity. Although the legacy hydropower from NYPA does account for about 70 percent of the renewable power generated in the state, years of investments in new renewables have resulted in only a few percentage points of electricity coming from wind and solar.

NYPA does not have the statutory authority to sell electricity to SUNY campuses in upstate and is limited in the ways it can supply private colleges, although the authority may again make a push to broaden its customer base in budget negotiations this year, as it did last year.

"We continue to work with SUNY to assist in seeking out beneficial large-scale renewable projects," said NYPA spokesperson Paul DeMichele. He declined to say if NYPA bid on the NYCARES consultant solicitation.

All ratepayers in the state are subsidizing or will soon be paying for new renewables, existing nuclear and offshore wind to meet Cuomo's goal of 50 percent of electricity to come from renewables by 2030.

The request for proposals issued by the consortium, which closed in mid-October, calls for the consultant to acquire at least 150,000 megawatt hours annually of renewable electricity from generators that qualify as new renewables under the state's Clean Energy Standard. This would mean they would not have to separately subsidize renewables by paying for required renewable energy credits.

The consultant will also be asked to seek proposals for large-scale renewables that could meet all of SUNY's 1.3 million megawatt hour annual electricity demand. Private campus members may also seek to purchase renewable energy from projects in out-of-state markets.

NYCARES is initially targeting renewable projects that will enter service by the end of 2020 and for the rest of SUNY campuses by the end of 2022, according to the RFP.

Johnson said SUNY will be open to purchasing renewables from NYPA or working with the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. She said the renewables will not all have to be new projects.

"If you use existing renewables, you're still going to create that market signal," Johnson said.

Campuses purchasing electricity using power purchase agreements from renewables provides financial certainty with locked-in prices and is becoming increasingly common, said Julian Dautremont-Smith, the director of programs for the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. It is also usually less expensive than buying renewable energy credits separately, which is an added cost, he said.

Aggregating demand provides benefits around scale and collaborative momentum for higher education institutions, Dautremont-Smith said. While these types of consortiums exist already, NYCARES is unique in two aspects.

"It's unique in its size. Twenty-one institutions is more than any of the other aggregations I'm aware of. ... And the other thing is the blending of public and private institutions," he said. "It's really exciting to see that many campuses come together."

Bard College, a small private liberal arts college in Dutchess County, has set a goal of being carbon neutral by 2035 and sees buying renewable electricity as a key component of that effort, said Bard energy manager Dan Smith.

"The principal reasoning [for joining NYCARES] was the more solar or renewables that are developed, the more scale, the more attractive the prices and cost-benefits are," he said.

SUNY officials and the private campuses also see an opportunity for educational benefits from the program.

"This project will serve as an incredible teaching tool by giving us a direct case study," said Skidmore College's Levi Rogers, director of sustainability programs and assessment at the Saratoga Springs school. "NYCARES will provide our students with another pathway for learning about renewable energy development and policy, and will exemplify the possibilities of collaborative partnerships."

While getting to 100 percent renewable electricity is a major step, Johnson said there are several other areas to tackle.

"The next thing we've got to do is decarbonize our transportation fleet, so we've got to do electric vehicles and electric buses. It's still a lift but it's low-hanging fruit. The tough thing is the ... natural gas."

Johnson said all new SUNY buildings will be net-zero carbon emissions, and part of SUNY's capital plan request is to make energy efficiency investments to reduce natural gas use during major critical maintenance.