Activists hope Massachusetts can go fossil fuel-free by 2050

BOSTON (AP) — Massachusetts environmentalists have long dreamed of a green future in which the state shakes off its reliance on fossil fuels. Now they have a date: 2050.

That's just three decades away, but backers of the effort, including dozens of Beacon Hill lawmakers, say it's realistic, provided the state starts carving out a path to that future now.

A bill filed by Sen. Jamie Eldridge, of Acton, and Reps. Sean Garballey, of Arlington, and Marjorie Decker, of Cambridge — all Democrats — would commit Massachusetts to obtaining 100 percent of its energy from renewable sources like solar and wind.

Supporters say the bill would require the state to achieve total renewable electricity generation by 2035 and phase out fossil fuels across all sectors, including heating and transportation, by mid-century. The bill has 55 legislative co-sponsors — all Democrats in the overwhelming Democrat-controlled Legislature.

If passed, the bill would make Massachusetts the first state to commit to total renewable energy economy-wide.

Hawaii has already committed to 100 percent renewables for the electric sector by 2045, but not including transportation and heating.

States like California and New York have also set renewable energy goals of 50 percent by 2030, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Vermont has a goal of 75 percent by 2032. The standards typically require utilities to sell a specified percentage or amount of renewable electricity.

"Massachusetts has been a leader on alternative energy policy for over a decade, and now with federal assaults on efforts to combat climate change, it will be up to individual states to protect the environmental and health interests of the public," Eldridge said.

The bill would require the Department of Energy Resources to set binding targets for renewable energy growth in all major sectors of the economy, and issue regulations to ensure that Massachusetts stays on track toward 100 percent renewable energy by 2050.

It's also designed to build on the state's 2008 Global Warming Solutions Act, which requires
Massachusetts to reduce its carbon emissions by at least 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

That law was the subject of a lawsuit last year after environmental groups sued Massachusetts for failing to adopt strict limits on greenhouse gas emissions.

Lawyers for the Conservation Law Foundation and four Boston and Wellesley teenagers asked the courts to rule the state hasn’t lived up to its own law — the most aggressive of its kind in the country when it passed, according to advocates.

The groups said the 2008 law requires the Department of Environmental Protection to set strict greenhouse gas emissions limits to help the state meet its goal of first reducing those emissions by 25 percent by 2020. Lawyers for the state argued the law calls on the DEP to set only “a desired level of declining” emission limits.

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court sided with the environmental groups and ruled the state hadn’t met the law’s requirements.

Also last year, Republican Gov. Charlie Baker signed a bill aimed at ramping up reliance on renewable and alternative sources of energy.

The law requires utilities to solicit long-term contracts with offshore wind farm developers to bring at least 1,600 megawatts of wind energy, enough to power about 240,000 homes, to Massachusetts in the next decade.

It also encourages the delivery of larger supplies of Canadian hydropower and other renewables, provides incentives for utilities to develop energy storage technology and sets new requirements for the repair of natural gas leaks.

Adding to the law’s urgency is the scheduled shutdown of the Pilgrim nuclear plant in Plymouth in 2019.

Not everyone, including some environmental groups, is thrilled with the way that pursuit of renewable energy is playing out.

Groups like the Environmental League of Massachusetts say they fear the state is looking to favor large hydropower resources at the expense of other sources of renewable energy, like onshore wind and solar power.

Despite disputes and lawsuits, environmentalists say the state needs to keep moving toward that post-fossil fuel future. They say that not only will the air be cleaner, but also that the Massachusetts economy will make a name for itself as a renewable energy hub.