



350VT Testimony to the Vermont House Environment and Energy Committee

January 17, 2024

Good morning.

My name is Vanessa Rule and I am the lead organizer and co-director of 350VT. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. And thank you for your service. The more I learn about how Vermont's legislature works, the more appreciative I am of the arduous task and conditions you face and how hard you work.

I am here testifying on behalf of the thousands of Vermonters who volunteer with and support the work of 350VT. Our mission is to build a people-powered and people-led climate justice movement in Vermont for a just and thriving world.

In addition to our regular membership, and our volunteer Electricity and Campaign Teams, I am here representing the 166 people who signed up to take action after attending one of our 11 Empower Vermont events this fall. These events were designed to give attendees the opportunity to understand where our electricity comes from and why our Renewable Energy Standard needs updating.

Most were shocked to find out that the majority of Vermont's so-called renewable electricity does little to reduce carbon pollution. At the end of the presentations, attendees often expressed anger at the current system and a feeling of inspiration to change it. They translated their outrage and hope into action. They reached out to most of you, made public comments at legislative working group meetings, attended DPS events, and wrote letters to the editor. They showed that there is public support in Vermont for updating the RES so that it works to deliver more just and low-emissions electricity.

350VT is highly supportive of revising the Renewable Energy Standard. We support the creation of Tier 1a (new renewables from the region) and increasing Tier 2 (new renewables from in-state) requirements in the proposed bill. This increases the amount

for low-emission electricity (that's solar and wind) from 10% by 2032 to between 30-40% by 2030/2035, depending on the utilities' respective goals.

We understand the significance of the compromise reached between the utilities and the environmental groups at the table. This makes it much more likely that Governor Scott won't veto the bill and that you would have the numbers to override a veto if he did. We understand that you are working within the bounds of what is currently politically possible.

And, you probably know that despite these efforts, 40% is not enough.

When I, and many others involved in the 350.org movement started advocating for elected officials to act on climate in 2007, my children were 3 and 6 years old. I learned then that the maximum safe amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere is 350ppm - hence 350.org and 350VT. Do you know at what level of ppm human life on earth evolved? About 270ppm. Today we are over 420ppm - that's 20% higher than the maximum safe level and rising faster than ever. The heat we are feeling today is the result of emissions from 30 years ago. With what's in the atmosphere now, plus all we continue to add year after year, warming will continue to accelerate, and the Vermont our children inherit will look nothing like where we live today.

I read in Bill McKibben's *Eaarth* in 2010 about how wildfires, storms, and droughts would wreak havoc by washing out our roads, by making it harder to grow food, by displacing people and by increasing geopolitical conflicts, harming the most those who had done the least to cause the problem. It's 2024 and we are starting to see the true impacts of climate change. And this is only the tip of the iceberg unless we take action that is proportional to the crisis.

This summer, I lay awake most of the night during the July storm that put Montpelier under water. I heard the unrelenting pounding rain, feeling the full wrath of our planet and wondering if we could, in fact, do anything to avert total climate catastrophe. I asked myself: what will the storms, droughts, and wildfires look like in Vermont 5 or 10 year from now? What happens if we don't do enough to stop this? The thing is, we know: later is too late. Now is the time.

Our communities, our children, our planet need us to get to 100% low-emission renewables (solar and wind) as quickly as possible to protect them from runaway climate change.

So 40% is not enough but it is an important start. We need your commitment to an aggressive and ongoing revision of the RES moving forward to reach 100% low-emissions renewables as quickly as possible. We understand that our electricity sector also needs to be affordable and reliable.

The good news is that this transition to 100% low-emission electricity is increasingly feasible: the cost of solar and wind is dropping - they are now cheaper than coal and nuclear; battery storage technology improves by leaps and bounds every day; the need for mining rare metals is decreasing thanks to new materials and recycling; and the vast majority of people want leaders to act.

Here are 4 things we ask you to do to get us on the right track:

→ **First**, we need to be honest about how much this bill will actually reduce emissions. Renewable energy is not necessarily low-emission.

The claim is that this bill gets us from 75 to 100% renewable energy. The public and many elected officials have been misled into believing that our electricity is cleaner than it is. This has made it harder to get public and political support for cleaning it up. The science and research tell us that large hydropower, the use of unbundled renewable energy credits, and biomass emit significant greenhouse gas emissions. They have no place as solutions in a bill whose purpose is to address the climate crisis.

The current bill still allows for a 20% increase from large hydropower, more unbundled renewable energy credits, and biomass under Tier 1. That means 20% more emissions from flooding Indigenous land in Quebec and burning gas and wood.

→ So our **second** ask is: instead of leaving this 20% under Tier 1, we ask you to increase Tier 1a and Tier 2 requirements from 40% to 60% by 2030 so that this 20% is guaranteed to come from solar and wind. (We understand current HQ contracts will be online through 2038 and we're not asking you to touch these.)

→ **Third, the proposed bill eliminates group net-metering. If group net metering is going to be eliminated, an alternative and viable path for community solar needs to be put in its place.** Many Vermonters, including affordable housing advocates, support and will champion community-owned solar - some of those same people will oppose utility owned solar in their communities. Vermonters are a proud self-reliant people, and are culturally much more likely to embrace new solar if they own it. As we electrify everything, this bill sets up the electric utilities as the sole source monopoly for our full range of energy needs. Consumer choice is eliminated as the product becomes

more and more essential. We need consumer choice. And the beautiful thing is, today's technology allows this. We should be encouraging community solar, not creating bigger and bigger obstacles.

We are also organizing conversations about solar and siting in order to find ways to meet the need for increasing solar while protecting agricultural land, open space, and biodiversity. We believe this energy transition will be much more feasible if Vermonters have a say and agency over what it looks like.

→ **Fourth**, there are two companion bills that would increase the likelihood of passing the RES and make it more achievable.

a) H. 668 the **Ratepayer Protection** bill sponsored by Representative Stebbins, which would lay the groundwork for a bill in 2025 to protect low and middle income rate payers.

Ratepayer protection is essential - even now - as low-income families spend over 5 times more of their monthly income on energy bills than higher-income families.

And as we consider cost, we need to ask ourselves what the costs of transitioning to solar and wind will be compared to the cost of recurrent climate catastrophes. How much did the July storm cost Vermonters financially, physically, emotionally? What was the cost to the people whose homes and farms were destroyed? What about the cost to those who couldn't make it to work? To the health workers working overtime without extra compensation? How often will this kind of storm happen moving forward? How do these costs compare to the cost of investing in a resilient low-emissions and reliable grid?

b) The 2nd bill is the **Thermal Energy Networks** bill co-sponsored by Representatives Torre and Cordes. It would decrease the electricity demand from air source heat pumps and our need to burn carbon-based fuels to heat buildings. Thermal Energy Networks could be owned by municipalities.

Vermonters want more energy choices at their disposal to actively support and participate in this energy transition. We literally need to put more power in the hands of the people.

What about jobs? There are so many jobs to be gained from this transition. Solar and wind energy jobs have steadily decreased since the Renewable Energy Standard passed in 2017. You can turn that around.

Finally, we want to raise concern about the disproportionate voice the utilities have in this process. We are grateful for their work keeping the lights on and understand that we need to work with them through this transition. We appreciate that they came to the table to reach a compromise. But we need to acknowledge that our biggest utility is accountable to shareholder profits first and that they are part of an industry that has systematically and intentionally slowed progress on climate - including by threatening rate increases – because this energy transition threatens their bottom line.

We ask you to keep this in mind as you consider what you do this session. Whose interests are you hearing the loudest? Who stands to benefit or lose? What do Vermonters want? What is at stake?

Thank you for tackling this most important and challenging task. You and Governor Scott are the people in this state currently with the most power to improve the lives of those disproportionately impacted by the production and burning of carbon based fuels and by climate change. And you and Governor Scott hold our children and our planet's future in your hands.

Supporting documents

[Carbon by birth year calculator](#)

350VT [Empower Vermont for Truly Clean and Just Electricity presentation](#)

[The 2023 Energy Action Network Annual Progress Report: Key Finding #4 Energy Equity.](#)

Buis, Alan. [*A Degree of Concern: Why Global Temperatures Matter*](#), Global Climate Change Website, NASA.

DiFelice, Mia. [*How Utilities Use Our Electric Bills to Block Climate Action*](#), Food and Water Watch, January 30, 2023.

McKibben, Bill. [*Fully Recharged: Batteries May Not be Sexy, But...*](#) January 4, 2024

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Global Monitoring Lab, Earth System Research Laboratory, [Trends in Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide.](#)

Tigue, Kristoffer, *'Giant Methane Factories': Hydropower Has Long Been Touted as Clean Energy. But Is It?*, Inside Climate News, July 14, 2023

Tierney, Susan and Bird, Lori - *Setting the Record Straight About Renewable Energy*, World Resource Institute, May 12, 2020

Warrick, Joby. *Utilities Sensing Threat Put the Squeeze on Booming Solar Roof Industry*
- Washington Post, March 7, 2015