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HOUSE BILL NO. 206

Offered January 12, 2022

Prefiled January 10, 2022

A BILL to amend and reenact § 10.1-1197.6 of the Code of Virginia, relating to small renewable energy projects; impact on natural resources.

Patron—Webert

Committee Referral Pending

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:**1. That § 10.1-1197.6 of the Code of Virginia is amended and reenacted as follows:****§ 10.1-1197.6. Permit by rule for small renewable energy projects.**

A. Notwithstanding the provisions of § 10.1-1186.2:1, the Department shall develop, by regulations to be effective as soon as practicable, but not later than July 1, 2012, a permit by rule or permits by rule if it is determined by the Department that one or more such permits by rule are necessary for the construction and operation of small renewable energy projects, including such conditions and standards necessary to protect the Commonwealth's natural resources. If the Department determines that more than a single permit by rule is necessary, the Department initially shall develop the permit by rule for wind energy, which shall be effective as soon as practicable, but not later than January 1, 2011. Subsequent permits by rule regulations shall be effective as soon as practicable.

B. The conditions for issuance of the permit by rule for small renewable energy projects shall include:

1. A notice of intent provided by the applicant, to be published in the Virginia Register, that a person intends to submit the necessary documentation for a permit by rule for a small renewable energy project;

2. A certification by the governing body of the locality or localities wherein the small renewable energy project will be located that the project complies with all applicable land use ordinances;

3. Copies of all interconnection studies undertaken by the regional transmission organization or transmission owner, or both, on behalf of the small renewable energy project;

4. A copy of the final interconnection agreement between the small renewable energy project and the regional transmission organization or transmission owner indicating that the connection of the small renewable energy project will not cause a reliability problem for the system. If the final agreement is not available, the most recent interconnection study shall be sufficient for the purposes of this section. When a final interconnection agreement is complete, it shall be provided to the Department. The Department shall forward a copy of the agreement or study to the State Corporation Commission;

5. A certification signed by a professional engineer licensed in Virginia that the maximum generation capacity of the small renewable energy project by (i) an electrical generation facility that generates electricity only from sunlight or wind as designed does not exceed 150 megawatts; (ii) an electrical generation facility that generates electricity only from falling water, wave motion, tides, or geothermal power as designed does not exceed 100 megawatts; or (iii) an electrical generation facility that generates electricity only from biomass, energy from waste, or municipal solid waste as designed does not exceed 20 megawatts;

6. An analysis of potential environmental impacts of the small renewable energy project's operations on attainment of national ambient air quality standards;

7. ~~Where relevant, an~~ An analysis of the beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed project on natural resources. For wildlife, that analysis shall be based on information on the presence, activity, and migratory behavior of wildlife to be collected at the site for a period of time dictated by the site conditions and biology of the wildlife being studied, not exceeding 12 months;

8. If the Department determines that the information collected pursuant to subdivision B 7 indicates that significant adverse impacts to wildlife ~~or~~, historic resources, *prime agricultural soils, or forest lands* are likely, the submission of a mitigation plan *with a 90-day public comment period* detailing reasonable actions to be taken by the owner or operator to avoid, minimize, or otherwise mitigate such impacts, and to measure the efficacy of those actions. *For purposes of this subdivision, "prime agricultural soils" means soils recognized as prime farmland by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and "forest lands" has the same meaning as provided in § 10.1-1178, except that any parcel shall be considered to be forest lands if it was forested at least two years prior to the Department's receipt of a permit application. A project will be deemed to have a significant adverse impact if it would disturb more than 10 acres of prime agricultural soils or 50 acres of contiguous forest lands, or if it meets any other threshold for a*

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59 *significant adverse impact as the Department may establish via regulation;*

60 9. A certification signed by a professional engineer licensed in Virginia that the small renewable
61 energy project is designed in accordance with all of the standards that are established in the regulations
62 applicable to the permit by rule;

63 10. An operating plan describing how any standards established in the regulations applicable to the
64 permit by rule will be achieved;

65 11. A detailed site plan with project location maps that show the location of all components of the
66 small renewable energy project, including any towers. Changes to the site plan that occur after the
67 applicant has submitted an application shall be allowed by the Department without restarting the
68 application process, if the changes were the result of optimizing technical, environmental, and cost
69 considerations, do not materially alter the environmental effects caused by the facility, or do not alter
70 any other environmental permits that the Commonwealth requires the applicant to obtain;

71 12. A certification signed by the applicant that the small renewable energy project has applied for or
72 obtained all necessary environmental permits;

73 13. A requirement that the applicant hold a public meeting. The public meeting shall be held in the
74 locality or, if the project is located in more than one locality in a place proximate to the location of the
75 proposed project. Following the public meeting, the applicant shall prepare a report summarizing the
76 issues raised at the meeting, including any written comments received. The report shall be provided to
77 the Department; and

78 14. A 30-day public review and comment period prior to authorization of the project.

79 C. The Department's regulations shall establish a schedule of fees, to be payable by the owner or
80 operator of the small renewable energy project regulated under this article, which fees shall be assessed
81 for the purpose of funding the costs of administering and enforcing the provisions of this article
82 associated with such operations including, but not limited to, the inspection and monitoring of such
83 projects to ensure compliance with this article.

84 D. The owner or operator of a small renewable energy project regulated under this article shall be
85 assessed a permit fee in accordance with the criteria set forth in the Department's regulations. Such fees
86 shall include an additional amount to cover the Department's costs of inspecting such projects.

87 E. The fees collected pursuant to this article shall be used only for the purposes specified in this
88 article and for funding purposes authorized by this article to abate impairments or impacts on the
89 Commonwealth's natural resources directly caused by small renewable energy projects.

90 F. There is hereby established a special, nonreverting fund in the state treasury to be known as the
91 Small Renewable Energy Project Fee Fund, hereafter referred to as the Fund. Notwithstanding the
92 provisions of § 2.2-1802, all moneys collected pursuant to this § 10.1-1197.6 shall be paid into the state
93 treasury to the credit of the Fund. Any moneys remaining in the Fund shall not revert to the general
94 fund but shall remain in the Fund. Interest earned on such moneys shall remain in the Fund and be
95 credited to it. The Fund shall be exempt from statewide indirect costs charged and collected by the
96 Department of Accounts.

97 G. After the effective date of regulations adopted pursuant to this section, no person shall erect,
98 construct, materially modify or operate a small renewable energy project except in accordance with this
99 article or Title 56 if the small renewable energy project was approved pursuant to Title 56.

100 H. Any small renewable energy project shall be eligible for permit by rule under this section if the
101 project is proposed, developed, constructed, or purchased by a person that is not a utility regulated
102 pursuant to Title 56.

103 I. Any small renewable energy project commencing operations after July 1, 2017, shall be eligible
104 for permits by rule under this section and is exempt from State Corporation Commission environmental
105 review or permitting in accordance with subsection B of § 10.1-1197.8 or other applicable law if the
106 project is proposed, developed, constructed, or purchased by:

107 1. A public utility if the project's costs are not recovered from Virginia jurisdictional customers under
108 base rates, a fuel factor charge under § 56-249.6, or a rate adjustment clause under subdivision A 6 of §
109 56-585.1; or

110 2. A utility aggregation cooperative formed under Article 2 (§ 56-231.38 et seq.) of Chapter 9.1 of
111 Title 56.

112 2. That the Department of Environmental Quality, pursuant to subdivision B 8 of § 10.1-1197.6 of
113 the Code of Virginia, as amended by this act, shall convene an advisory panel to assist in further
114 developing regulations regarding criteria to determine if a significant adverse impact to wildlife,
115 historic resources, prime agricultural soils, or forest lands is likely to occur as a result of a
116 proposed small renewable energy project and guidelines for plans to mitigate such adverse
117 impacts.

118 3. That the Department of Environmental Quality shall include appropriate mitigation
119 recommendations, consistent with § 10.1-1197.6 of the Code of Virginia, as amended by this act, in
120 any environmental report required pursuant to § 56-46.1 for an electrical generating project before

121 the State Corporation Commission.