

Trump has dominated the national conversation for the past four years. While our eyes were on his efforts to rollback climate action, a lot has been happening at the state level. This post is the one of an episodic series of posts on state renewable energy policy. Today, the focus will be on North and South Carolina, where there have been some major developments despite conservative Republican legislatures in both states.

Before looking at the two states' policies, there's another important development to note: a big move by Duke Power, which is a major presence in those states and elsewhere in the Southeast. Duke's new [resource plan](#) provides two scenarios leading to a 70% CO₂ reduction by 2030, one relying on natural gas to make up for intermittent renewables and the other relying on battery storage. Those scenarios on state policies. But in any event, Duke plans to reach its own goal of at least a 50% reduction by 2030, with a long-term goal of zero emissions by 2050. All coal-fired plants would be retired by 2030. This planning effort is an indication that utilities see which direction things are heading. Another utility, Dominion Energy, has set a goal to reduce CO₂ emissions 80% by 2050 and methane emissions from natural gas assets 50% by 2030.

Now, let's take a look at state policies.

North Carolina

Pursuant to a 2018 executive order from Governor Roy Cooper (D), the Department of Environmental Quality has issued a clean energy plan to reduce emissions from all sectors 40% by 2025 and reduce power sector emissions 70% by 2025. Utility planning to meet that goal relies heavily on phasing out coal and replacing it with natural gas. Part of that effort was premised on completion of the Atlantic Coast pipeline to deliver additional natural gas to the Southeast, but that pipeline has now been canceled.

North Carolina utilities are under pressure from residential consumers, who are hungry for more rooftop solar, and from businesses. Half of the largest business users of power have set their own targets for increased use of renewables, and 37 companies in the state have set goals of using only renewable energy. Duke entered into a settlement with renewable energy groups in a dispute over grid planning, in which it agreed to make climate change part of its grid planning and assist low-income customers to obtain renewable energy and improve their energy efficiency.

South Carolina

The Palmetto state is a bastion of conservative Republicanism. In 2019, however, it passed

the “South Carolina Energy Freedom Act” (H. 3659, R. 82). That law eliminates a 2% cap on distributed energy resources, meaning that utilities can make more use of power from rooftop solar, demand response management (meaning coordinated usage reductions by consumers), and battery storage. The Act also puts in place a new pricing scheme for energy sold back to the grid by rooftop users, and makes it easier for independent power producers to interconnect with the grid and sell their power. It also makes it easier for companies to use leases for rooftop solar, rather than homeowners have to do the financing. Finally, it requires companies to consider alternative ways of satisfying energy needs, not just building more fossil fuel plants.

One factor in passing the bill was consumer resentment about having to pay for a canceled nuclear power reactor. Consumers wanted to recoup some of their money by selling power back to the grid. The bill was bipartisan, with Republican sponsors in both houses and Democratic co-sponsors. As an executive from a solar developer [said](#): ““As far as party lines go, we haven’t dealt with that at all in South Carolina. It’s been a truly bipartisan issue. . . At the end of the day, you almost have reverse roles, with South Carolina viewing solar as the free market opportunity in energy policy, and that should fit right into a Republican agenda.”

South Carolina’s reform is still relatively timid compared with more progressive states. The fact remains that even Republicans in one of the country’s most conservative states are seeing the need for change.

The changes in both states have taken place despite everything Trump has done to discourage renewables and promote fossil fuels. With or without Washington, the tide is definitely turning. Of course, with strong support from the federal government, it might turn even faster. Even in South Carolina, the state is heading in the direction Biden wants, just far too slowly.