The energy bill passed Wednesday by the Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee has renewable energy provisions so weak that a dozen environmental groups teamed up to condemn it. Marchant Wentworth of the Union of Concerned Scientists called the renewable standards in the bill "pitiful", and added that the legislation could actually lead to less renewable electric generation than is destine to occur without it. Friends of the Earth President Brent Blackwelder calls the bill "an example of policymaking at its worst. It demonstrates corporate special interests continue to wield far too much influence in Washington."

What has these and other environmentalist groups so riled up? While more than half the states require electricity sellers to rely on a certain percentage of renewable power, and many have called for a federal renewable portfolio standard, the bill in its current form would offer a formula similar to the watered-down version presented in last month in a House compromise. As a comparison, while California requires 20% renewable power by 2010, the bill would set a national standard of 15% by 2021. And states would be able to dilute that standard in a couple of ways. First, the output of new nuclear and some new coal plants could be subtracted from the baseline calculation, meaning that the 15% target would be smaller. Second, states could substitute energy efficiency improvements for renewable power. If a state could reduce its demand by 4% through better, efficiency, then its utilities would only need to meet an 11% renewable energy target.

Part of what the bill doesn't seem to recognize is that for greenhouse gas reduction purposes, efficiency and renewables are not interchangeable. We need both. Again, thinking about California, while utilities strive for 20% renewables by 2010 and 33% by 2020, they are also planning to spend $800 million over the next three years to promote efficiency. The two requirements are tracked separately, and one cannot be used to reduce the other.

As for the Senate bill, the environmental groups and dissatisfied senators hope for amendments on the floor.