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Editorial: Heavy lift ahead for clean energy

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There's no shortage of aspiration in Hawaii, but reaching its energy goals in particular will require a good deal of perspiration as well.

One ambitious target, set in state law for years, is to make the state's energy sources 100 percent renewable by 2045. Then the mayors got together and committed to transitioning all ground transportation to renewables within the same time frame.

Then last year the Legislature passed a carbon-neutral target by 2045. That will be a heavy lift, perhaps more than lawmakers realized, but it's important to press ahead in that direction anyway.

Last week the Honolulu Star-Advertiser editorial board met with the Blue Planet Foundation, a nonprofit public-policy group with a focus on supporting the transition to clean energy. It's determined to have state leaders keep an eye on that prize.

And all should celebrate the dogged determination that brought Hawaii to its current status: 27 percent of Hawaiian Electric Cos.' sales came from renewable energy last year. This is the same percentage as in 2017, but utility executives feel happy not to have lost ground when Kilauea's eruption last year cost Hawaii island most of its geothermal output.

Still, the entities have 3 percentage points to go in order to make the next state-mandated benchmark of 30 percent renewable by 2020. That doesn't sound like much but 3 percent more in "green" energy sales will take a push.

It's crucial that the state does not lose the momentum that's been building since the Hawaii Clean Energy Initiative was enacted just over a decade ago.

Even advocates such as Blue Planet acknowledge that much of the gains made so far have amounted to the "low-hanging fruit" of expanded solar-energy adoption, and that future progress may be harder.

On the other hand, technological improvements, paired with subsidies and other government assists, already have made advances possible that once seemed out of reach, so the wise policy is to take steps that are aimed in the

right direction, and trust that technology could offer new, unanticipated surprises.

Developments in solar energy battery storage have made new photovoltaic (PV) projects especially promising. In January, Hawaiian Electric submitted contracts for seven grid-scale, solar-plus-storage projects on three islands to the Public Utilities Commission for review. They comprise part of the state's largest and lowest-cost renewable-energy portfolio of new resources.

While that's encouraging, prospects at the state Capitol don't look as bright. Right out of the gate, it appears that one much-needed legislative change is dead for the session. House Bill 557, which sought to tighten the requirements for solar water heaters on new homes, failed to get a hearing before the House Judiciary Committee.

This is unfortunate. Variances from solar requirements placed on new home construction have been issued too easily, sacrificing an opportunity for an important advance toward green-energy goals.

However, there are other bills still alive at the Legislature that deserve support:

>> HB 556 would establish lighting and appliance efficiency standards for Hawaii, similar to California's, which would help ensure that more of the industry's energy-saving appliances are on the market here. This would certainly save consumers on their electric bills, and it should not be very burdensome on the industry as it already has adapted its product lines to meet the California standards.

>> HB 559 would give the electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure a boost by requiring that multi-unit residential buildings and workplaces be built with the proper wiring in place, making installation of a charger unit at some future point much cheaper for the building owner.

If EV adoption is to continue at its current healthy pace, lowering Hawaii's carbon footprint by more efficient use of energy, it has to be easier for the many apartment dwellers and employees here to find EV ownership more practical.

>>HB 1584 would appropriate funds to the University of Hawaii to conduct a comprehensive study of a statewide carbon tax.

According to the preamble for the bill: "Taxing fuels according to their carbon content will align the market with desired policy outcomes, from an individual's choice of vehicles, appliances, and housing to a business' choices of product design, capital investment, and facilities."

But it's also important to find ways of offsetting the regressiveness of a tax that disproportionately affects low- to moderate- income residents. Careful study is needed to get this policy right at the outset.

When the Clean Energy Initiative passed and was signed into law 10 years ago, a chief goal was to make Hawaii more self-sufficient and reduce greenhouse gases. Already the effects of those gases are apparent with the advent of climate change, making it even more plain: Hawaii is on the right path toward a green energy future, but must accelerate — now.