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Appalachian conference studies energy help

CINCINNATI Appalachian leaders are seeking ways to use alternative energy initiatives to spark the 13-state region's long-sluggish economy.

The annual Appalachian Regional Commission conference, held in Athens, Ohio, will focus this week on giving the struggling area a big role in the push for more use of sources such as solar and wind, bringing so-called "green jobs" with it.

"The economy throughout the region is struggling," said Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland, a native of Appalachia. "There are huge opportunities available that can be of great benefit to the region."

Nearly 400 people representing a range of interests are expected to participate, including investors, community activists and industry experts, said commission spokesman Louis Segesvary.

James E. Rogers, chairman and CEO of Charlotte, N.C.-based Duke Energy Corp., is the conference's keynote speaker Tuesday morning at Ohio University.

Regional leaders see alternative energy as a potential major source for jobs and for helping residents and businesses save money on energy costs, Segesvary said. The alternative sources are also seen as helping preserve scenic beauty in the region.

The Obama administration has encouraged jobs-creating alternative energy initiatives. In Ohio, Strickland, working with state lawmakers, had signed a bill in 2008 that overhauled the electricity industry and included a requirement for Ohio to produce a certain amount of electricity using renewable energy.

Strickland said in an interview he also supports new technologies to utilize the region's coal supply, and says the state's universities and community colleges can help in research and training for building Appalachia's energy-related economy.

The largely rural belt that runs from southern New York to northern Mississippi, which also encompasses most of southern and eastern Ohio, has been trying to develop its economy to offset the decline in manufacturing and coal-mining jobs. The recession has undercut one such effort involving tourism as most American households cut spending.

The some 420 counties that comprise the Appalachian region have been hit hard by the recession, according to The Associated Press Economic Stress Index, which measures unemployment, bankruptcies and foreclosures at the county level.

Counties in the 205,000-square-mile area have seen a steeper decline than the nation as a whole. The counties had an average Stress Index score of 6.0 in November 2007, the last month before America slid into the recession, compared to a nationwide average of 5.4. In August 2009, Appalachian counties had an average Stress score of 12.46, compared to 10.32 nationwide.

The commission dates to the Kennedy administration as an effort to develop projects for the lagging region's infrastructure and economy.

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Associated Press reporter Dionne Walker in Atlanta contributed to this story.