

Energy laws aim to help homeowners

Winter heating bills look tough for the poor

By Joe Hanel

Herald Denver Bureau

DENVER – Gov. Bill Ritter signed a batch of bills Tuesday that build on his signature issue – renewable energy.

The new laws attempt to let ordinary homeowners join in what Ritter calls the “New Energy Economy.”

“These bills share common objectives – investing in renewable energy and helping families with rising energy prices,” Ritter said.

The bills include House Bill 1350, which allows homeowners to get low-interest loans to install solar panels or make energy-efficient home improvements. Homeowners usually need 20 years to recoup their investment in expensive solar panels – too long for many people who might want to move.

HB 1350 allows homeowners to pay back the loans by taking out liens on their houses. The lien will stay with the house even if it is sold. The owners would have to pay back the lien, but they would have lower electricity bills thanks to the solar panels. A separate bill, Senate Bill 184, allows the state to loan \$10 million a year to homeowners for energy upgrades.

Low-income households will get help with their utility bills through HB 1387, which extends a \$13 million subsidy from the state that was set to expire next year.

The bill also allows the poor to apply for subsidies to weatherize their homes.

However, natural-gas futures prices are rising, and the money from HB 1387 won't be nearly enough, said Skip Arnold, director of Energy Outreach Colorado, which raises money for the low-income heating program.

“Next winter we anticipate will be the worst winter ever for low-income households to heat their homes,” Arnold said.

Congress will have to reverse its trend of cutting support for low-income heating, Arnold said, and private donors will have to be more generous.

jhanel@durangoherald.com