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NEW LAW TO STRENGTHEN ENERGY SECURITY

China expects to draft a law within two years that will ensure its energy security, a senior energy official said.

The efforts were regarded as a major step to strengthen the country's energy-related legislative foundation and help sustain growth in the years to come. "We need a general law to ensure our energy security and we are buried in the efforts," said Xu Dingming, energy bureau head under the National Development and Reform Commission. Xu said "the meat of the law" is likely to include principles of energy saving, cleaner utilization and security, which have been repeatedly emphasized by China's highest leadership in drafting the country's blueprint for the next five years.

A team of experts and officials from the National People's Congress (NPC), the top legislature, and the State Council have already assembled twice to discuss preparations for legislation, said Xu, who is also the deputy office director of the State Council Energy Leading Group, headed by Premier Wen Jiabao.

But experts said the lawmaking is a real challenge as "specific laws related to energy have already been prepared." "So it's very easy to find that specific laws will conflict with the future energy law, which will reflect more of the latest changes," Zhang Jianyu, a visiting scholar with Tsinghua University, told China Daily.

China has had specific laws such as the Law of Electricity, the Law of Coal and the Law of Oil, and the Law of Energy Saving in force for years. And the Law of Renewable Energy will take effect next year.

"We will face a round of amending once the planned energy law has been drafted, passed by the NPC," Zhang said. But Zhang added "there is something more important than just legislation" when discussing China's energy challenges. "Personally speaking, the top priority ahead is to find convincing data to show how serious our challenges are." China has finished its initial oil reserve assessment by two high-profile expert groups, one from the China Academy of Engineering, which was entrusted by Premier Wen, and the other from Xu's commission.

But Xu said drafting the energy law is pressing because it will offer a legal foundation for such activities as setting up strategic energy reserves.

Coal law revision Revising the Law of Coal was regarded as another major measure to solidify China's energy legislative foundation. "We will finish the amendment draft at the end of this year," said Huang Shengchu, president of the China Coal Information Institute. "Expert teams have discussed it several times." Huang's institute is responsible for drafting amendments. According to China's legislative process, the draft amendment will be submitted to the Legislative Affairs Office under the State Council for approval. Then the amended law will be examined and approved by the NPC. Huang said the law will raise market entrance requirements for mine operators and force operators to treasure resources. It should also require them to spend more on safety measures.

Huang used the government's low resource utilization fee as an example. At present, the government charges mine owners just 1,000 yuan (US\$ 120) annually for 1 square kilometre of mineral field. "It's too cheap," he said. "The government should raise that by a big margin."