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The province's Green Energy Act may accelerate the development of water power in northern Ontario where there is abundant untapped potential, says the president of the Orillia Power Corporation.

"There are important water resources bottled up in the north," says John Mattinson, who sits on the board of the Ontario Waterpower Association.

Mattinson estimates that as many as 3,000 megawatts of hydro-electric power could be produced in northern Ontario, which would be a significant boost of renewable energy.

Currently, water power accounts for 8,000 megawatts of the province's 25,000 megawatt supply.

The new legislation looks very encouraging in terms of siting and developing renewable energy projects, Mattinson said.

"It looks like they are going to streamline the approvals process."

The OPC currently produces 15 megawatts of power at three hydro-electric plants.

They have been trying to build a fourth plant on the Musquash River near Go Home Lake in the Township of Muskoka Lakes.

The plant, which would produce eight megawatts of electricity, is being opposed by residents and the municipality, which owns some of the land that would be flooded if a dam is built.

The new legislation will make it more difficult for renewable energy projects to be blocked by NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard) or BANANAs (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone), Mattinson said.

"This is a whole new ball game."

The province is recognizing that water power and other forms of renewable energy are absolutely critical to our future, Mattinson said.

Being able to provide a secure supply of environmentally friendly energy will help attract investment to Ontario as green awareness and concern about global warming has a greater influence on business, he says.

"It's our planet that's at stake." One of the obstacles to delivering power from the north is limited transmission capacity, something the province must address, Mattinson said.

"Nobody's going to invest in generation if there's trouble getting the power out. The transmission grid has to be improved."

As well as being emission-free, water power is able to follow the demand as it rises and falls, said Mattinson.

This gives it greater flexibility than nuclear plants, which cannot be turned on and off as demand fluctuates (following the load) and are better for providing consistent base-load power.

Coal plants, which the province is attempting to phase out, also can fire up and shut down as demand changes.

"If the plan is to get off coal, we need some other form of load-following power. That's where water power makes sense."

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