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Winds of change off the Cape

The Boston Globe

March 11, 2008

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A SERIES of four regional hearings on the environmental impact of the Cape Wind project began last night in West Yarmouth, just as another developer proposed a deepwater wind farm 23 miles south of Martha's Vineyard. The water is 12 to 45 feet deep at Cape Wind's Horseshoe Shoals location, and siting wind turbines in water much deeper than that will present technical hurdles. If Netherlands-based Blue H Technologies can overcome them, that will represent major progress in harnessing an emissions-free energy source.

But the need for renewable energy is so great that any deepwater plans should supplement Cape Wind, not replace it.

This week's hearings give the public a chance to react to the draft environmental report on Cape Wind that was released in January by the US Interior Department's Minerals Management Service. That report found that the 130 turbines would have mostly minor or negligible impacts on wildlife, tourism, fishing, and navigation. Opponents of the project, many of whom own homes on the Cape or Islands, worry in particular about its effect on the seascape. At their closest point, Cape Wind's turbines would be about 5 miles from Hyannis.

The timing of the Blue H announcement just days before the hearings begin has prompted skepticism from Cape Wind advocates that the new proposal is being offered as an "out of sight" alternative to Cape Wind. But according to two new studies, the planet needs all the wind projects - inland or offshore, shallow water or deep - it can get.

The studies in the journals Geophysical Research Letters and Global Biogeochemical Cycles present evidence that both developed and developing countries must reduce their carbon dioxide emissions virtually to zero in the next few decades. Such a reduction exceeds the most ambitious goals currently supported by policymakers. But without it, the buildup of greenhouse gases will heat the planet so much that precipitation patterns will change significantly and much of the world will be subject to droughts.

The damage caused by fossil fuels is not limited to their carbon emissions. The advocacy group Clean Power Now, which favors the Cape Wind project, has brought activists from Appalachia to the hearings to describe the impact that mountaintop-removal coal mining has on that region's environment and the health of its residents. Coal currently fuels 50 percent of US electricity.

This week's hearings should be the next step in a decisive green light for Cape Wind, which could supply power equal to three-quarters of the Cape's demand. If this week also marks the first step in a successful deepwater wind project, so much the better. ■

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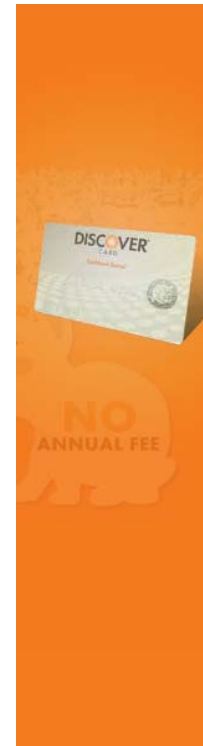
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