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News

Floating turbines offers a new approach to offshore wind power

Blue H's 328-foot-tall wind turbine is different from the offshore generators that have sparked opposition from U.S. coastal residents. Because it sits atop pontoons, this turbine can operate in water farther from shore, where winds are stronger and more reliable - and where it's not visible from land. ...Linowes said that those opposing onshore wind projects - which often are gigantic schemes spanning tens of thousands of acres - welcome proposals to place turbines out in the water. She calls current onshore turbines "dinosaurs" and says she finds Blue H's idea appealing because it shows "that we should look to new technology rather than bigger land-based turbines," she said.

September 20, 2008 by Shelley Emling in Austin Statesman

Less expensive to build than fixed turbines, floating turbines take advantage of stronger winds at sea.

Floating in the Mediterranean Sea 12 miles off the coast of southern Italy is a British company's answer to part of America's energy problem.

Blue H's 328-foot-tall wind turbine is different from the offshore generators that have sparked opposition from U.S. coastal residents. Because it sits atop pontoons, this turbine can operate in water farther from shore, where winds are stronger and more reliable - and where it's not visible from land.

"There are stronger winds of a greater quality because they are not affected by contours onshore such as mountains and buildings," said Neal Bastick, Blue H's chief executive, who added that there's also "no negative visual impact."

Blue H is seeking a lease from the U.S. Minerals Management Service for a demonstration project 23 miles off the coast of Massachusetts. If successful, the Massachusetts project could grow in time into a 120-turbine project capable of generating 420 megawatts of electricity - enough to power more than a quarter-million homes.

With the continuation of high fuel prices, proponents of alternative energy sources contend that turning to wind energy should be a no-brainer.

Already, wind farms generate thousands of megawatts of electricity throughout the country. The biggest are in West Texas.

But concerns about visual pollution have kept wind projects from operating off U.S. coasts, as there are off some coasts of Europe.

Experts say offshore winds are more reliable, with a far-offshore wind turbine running nearly half the time, compared with a land-based turbine that produces electricity about one-third of the time.

Bastick said that floating turbines are cheaper to install than other offshore turbines, which sit on

fixed foundations in the seabed. Floating turbines stay in place with the help of strong chains linked to giant weights on the sea floor.

These turbines lessen the impact on shipping and bird populations while sending electricity ashore via undersea cable.

Even those who remain skeptical of wind energy as a real solution to America's energy challenges are more receptive to the idea of far-offshore wind turbines than they are to onshore ones.

"Blue H's idea offers a way to satisfy the desire for (renewable energy sources) and wind without the heartache of the towers," said Lisa Linowes, executive director of the Industrial Wind Action Group, a New Hampshire-based nonprofit group opposed to wind turbines in residential areas.

Linowes said that those opposing onshore wind projects - which often are gigantic schemes spanning tens of thousands of acres - welcome proposals to place turbines out in the water.

She calls current onshore turbines "dinosaurs" and says she finds Blue H's idea appealing because it shows "that we should look to new technology rather than bigger land-based turbines," she said.

But offshore turbines - even floating ones - aren't without their challenges.

"The sea is a very harsh and unfriendly environment at the best of times, and installing machinery out there, which is designed to work for 25 years, is clearly most challenging and, in its own right, creates multiple technical and logistic challenges," Bastick said.

The U.S. Department of Energy recently predicted that wind could generate 20 percent of the country's energy by 2030, with offshore sources accounting for nearly 20 percent of that.

Texas, the country's leading oil producer for the past century, is now the leading producer of electricity from wind, having eclipsed California in 2006. As such, Texas also is eyeing a new generation of offshore wind projects.

The Texas General Land Office has five active offshore wind leases, but none are in production yet.

"But the first project is nearing completion of its research phase, and we hope it will be in production shortly," said Dwain Rogers, the General Land Office's deputy commissioner for renewable energy.

In the meantime, Delaware is hot on Texas's heels, hoping to become the first state to construct a wind farm off its coast with a project that's set to be completed in 2012.

That project, by Bluewater Wind, which is owned by the global investment firm Babcock & Brown, would include between 60 and 200 wind turbines spaced about a half-mile apart.

"You're going to see a lot more offshore wind projects, especially off the Eastern Seaboard, where the ocean floor stays shallow sometimes for 20 miles or so," said Matt Dallas, a spokesman for San Francisco-based Babcock & Brown. "This makes it easier to position turbines way offshore."

Even as efforts to build far-offshore turbines pick up steam, some states, such as Florida, are still struggling to win approval for even land-based wind turbines.

The St. Lucie Wind project, which would include up to six turbines adjacent to the St. Lucie Nuclear Power Plant, is the first wind project proposed in the state by Florida Power & Light Co., the largest producer of wind energy in the country.

Currently, the project - which has raised concerns over its effect on wildlife - is being reviewed by the St. Lucie Board of County Commissioners.

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