



Cape Wind project heads to crucial round of public hearings

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BOSTON (AP) - Backers of a proposal to build 130 windmills across 25 miles of federal waters in Nantucket Sound will get what may be their best, last chance to make their case to federal regulators at a series of four public hearings this week.

The same goes for critics of the project.

The hearings by the federal Minerals Management Service on their draft environmental impact report could be one of the fiercest showdowns to date on the contentious plan by Cape Wind Associates.

The project, which has been working its way through the state and federal regulatory process since November, 2001, has also split the state's top political leaders.

Gov. Deval Patrick, who campaigned to make Massachusetts a leader in renewable energy, says the plan to build the nation's first offshore wind farm is a part of that initiative.

"I support Cape Wind," Gov. Deval Patrick said during a recent radio interview. "It's not to say that there aren't thoughtful arguments on the other side, but on balance it makes sense."

But Sen. Edward Kennedy, whose family's Hyannis Port compound would have a clear view of the farm, is among critics of the plan who say the windmills would mar a pristine seascape.

One of the state's leading environmental groups says Cape Wind will mark an important milestone.

"This 130 turbine proposal is one of our nation's most promising clean energy projects," said Conservation Law Foundation President Philip Warburg. "Once built, it will immediately deliver emissions-free wind generated power to thousands of Massachusetts residents."

The backers of the project were buoyed by the release of Minerals Management Service's 2,000 page draft environmental impact report in January. The report said Cape Wind would have mostly "minor" or "negligible" effects on wildlife, ocean navigation, fishing and tourism.

Supporters are hoping to reinforce the project's positives as the federal agency prepares its final environmental impact study that will accompany its decision whether to approve or reject the project.

The hearings in West Yarmouth, Nantucket, Oak Bluffs and Boston come nearly a year after the project won state environmental approval.

"At this point it's safe to say that Cape Wind has undergone more public comment than any energy project in the history of Massachusetts," Cape Wind Associates spokesman Mark Rodgers said.

Critics aren't giving up. They say that despite the lengthy review, there are still important questions that haven't been answered.

Glenn Wattley, head of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, ticked off what he said were a series of unresolved issues, from the true economic impact of the project to concerns about what kinds of birds might most likely be killed by the turbines.

"There are studies that should have been done that haven't been done," Wattley said. "They haven't done the requisite study of what kinds of birds are flying through that area."

Wattley also said more research needs to be done on whether the turbines, which tower 440 feet above sea level when the tallest blades point straight up, could interfere with radar.

"It's a known fact that wind turbines deflect radar -- radar on ships and radar on airplanes," he said. "We have a serious safety issue that is still being sorted out by the Coast Guard and FAA."

If all goes as planned under Cape Wind's timetable, construction of the turbines could begin when all the permits are approved. Total construction could take about two years, with the turbines up and running by 2011.

There are still potential hurdles ahead.

Even if Cape Wind wins a final approval from the Minerals Management Service -- a decision could come later this year -- they still face potential lawsuits.

The hearings come as another developer is proposing a deep-water wind farm 23 miles off the coast of Martha's Vineyard. The project by Blue H USA could avoid some of the concerns raised about the Cape Wind project, which is much closer to shore.

Blue H plans to detail the project Monday.

At the end of the day, Cape Wind's Mark Rodgers says he's convinced the project will become a reality.

"There's a light at the end of the tunnel," he said. "We think we should have all the permits in place by the end of the year."

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