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Push to dramatically increase Mass. wind power whips up debate about where to locate turbines

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BOSTON (AP) - While nearly everyone agrees wind power is key to Massachusetts' energy future, deciding where to put the massive, spinning turbines is a much thornier issue.

As many as 3,000 turbines may be needed to reach Gov. Deval Patrick's goal of generating 2,000 megawatts of wind power by the year 2020. The state has just nine wind turbines now, producing less than seven megawatts a year.

Unlike other forms of green power such as solar panels or landfill methane gas, it's hard to hide a wind turbine, particularly in a state as small and densely populated as Massachusetts. By necessity, wind turbines tend to be in very prominent locations -- along ridge lines, on the tops of hills and near the shoreline.

That's creating a dilemma for conservationists and environmentalists who support renewable energy, but also want to preserve the state's wildlife population and scenic vistas.

"We don't want to see the landscape be entirely filled up with these," said Mike Gildesgame of the Appalachian Mountain Club. "We don't support the idea that wherever there is a wind resource, you should put a wind machine."

Gildesgame is a member of a commission established under the 2008 Green Communities Act charged with coming up with proposed guidelines on the siting of renewable energy facilities, including wind turbines.

He's not alone in urging caution.

Regulators should also take into account whether a turbine will harm wildlife, environmentalists say -- not just in a specific area, but whether the turbines and the roads needed to service them will fracture the networks of open space migrating animals depend on to survive.

"If you break apart connectively between those lands, it's harder for those species," said Stephen Long of the Nature Conservancy. "Not only do you need to preserve the species, but the stage on which the actors survive."

Those questions are particularly critical in places like the Berkshires, an area with plenty of elevated, windy areas, but also some of the state's most undeveloped landscapes.

One project already in the pipeline is a 15 megawatt wind farm being developed by Berkshire Wind Power

on Brodie Mountain in Hancock. The project is expected to include 10 turbines, each producing about 1.5 megawatts.

But Massachusetts' biggest wind resource is located far from the Berkshires.

The largely untapped gusts that blow along the state's Atlantic coast hold such a promise of nearly unlimited megawatts they have been dubbed the Saudi Arabia of wind power. The area is also the setting for one of the nation's longest running offshore wind power sagas.

Since 2001, Cape Wind Associates have been pursuing the state and federal permits needed to build 130 windmills across 25 miles of federal waters in Nantucket Sound -- enough to generate an estimated 420 megawatts of power.

Mark Rodgers, spokesman for Cape Wind Associates, said the project has helped establish the regulatory ground work for future ocean-based wind farms and that as more are built, resistance to them should ease.

"The history of wind power development is that familiarity breeds acceptance and support," he said. "Those acceptance levels go up when people have more experience with modern turbines. People like the way they look. They realize they are not loud."

Acceptance isn't the only emotion that familiarity breeds.

Critics of the Cape Wind project, who have been battling the plan for years, say the project is in the wrong place. They say the turbines could harm birds and the lights needed to illuminate the turbines after dark would disrupt nighttime views from nearby beaches.

They also say it's unfair for those in other parts of the state to accuse them of simply taking a "NIMBY" or "Not In My Back Yard" attitude.

"A lot of people from Boston point a NIMBY finger at Cape Cod, but if someone proposed a series of wind turbines down the Charles River there would be an uproar," said Glenn Wattlely, president of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound.

Despite his opposition to Cape Wind, Wattlely said he agrees the greatest opportunities for wind power are offshore -- way, way offshore. He said the future of wind power is in floating turbines located so far from land they are out of sight.

Boston-based **Blue H USA** has been seeking permission to put a demonstration floating turbine in federal waters 23 miles off the coast of Massachusetts' Martha Vineyard and 45 miles from New Bedford. The company eventually wants to build 120 turbines, enough to generate 420 megawatts a year.

In the end, activists say, the switch to green energy, including wind power, will require some trade-offs, but will pay dividends in cleaner air, more jobs and energy independence.

"We'd rather have some relatively visible clean energy resources like wind turbines, than dirty, old coal plants that relatively few people see but have the most impact on climate and public health," said Sue Reid, a staff attorney for the Conservation Law Foundation.

7

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