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Wind: The other untapped offshore energy; Despite taking a back seat in the news to offshore drilling, wind-driven turbines are likely to be operating before oil platforms

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WASHINGTON

Associated Press

Visitors to Rehoboth Beach, Del., soon may be greeted by more than sand dunes, seagulls and beach umbrellas. If offshore wind advocates have their way, scores of 140-foot blades will be spinning in the ocean breeze nearly a dozen miles away, barely visible to the sunbathers.

Offshore wind has taken a back seat to offshore drilling for oil and natural gas in the current energy debate. But those wind-driven turbines probably will be operating long before oil platforms appear off Atlantic Coast states.

Delaware hopes to be the first state to construct a wind farm off its coast. The project, scheduled to be completed in 2012, is one of several offshore wind proposals that have cleared significant hurdles in recent months.

Proponents say wind offers more long-term energy independence than offshore oil. Residents along the Eastern seaboard are embracing it as a stable-priced, environmentally friendly energy alternative.

"When people see the price of gas hit \$4, they are very open to having discussions about alternatives," said Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, a nonprofit group.

Increasing volume

Wind energy today accounts for only 1 percent of the nation's electricity. A May report from the Energy Department concluded wind energy could generate 20 percent by 2030, with offshore sources accounting for nearly 20 percent of that. Projects mostly would be located along the Atlantic coast because the seabed floor elsewhere drops off too quickly to anchor turbines.

In Delaware, offshore wind has caught everyone's imagination, said Patricia Gearity, a member of Citizens for Clean Power, a grass-roots organization based in the state.

"People liked that it was homegrown wind, that we weren't going to import it from somewhere else," said Jeremy Firestone, a professor of marine policy at the University of Delaware.

Offshore wind supporters say recent proposals have not faced the same kind of opposition that previously dogged projects off Massachusetts' Cape Cod and New York's Long Island. But even on Cape Cod, attitudes are changing. Where critics once held a floating anti-wind farm demonstration, polls show that public opinion has swung in favor of an offshore project.

The Long Island project was scrapped last year. But fishermen in neighboring New Jersey who once opposed offshore wind power have banded together to submit one of five bids for a 350-megawatt wind farm that would produce enough electricity for up to 100,000 households. Rhode Island may select a developer this fall for a wind energy project.

Delaware residents took to the blogosphere, called their legislators and turned out in droves at public hearings to push for the proposed project off Rehoboth Beach. It stalled last year, but months of negotiations and strong grass-roots organizing resulted in its approval by the Delaware Legislature in June.

"During that period of time, you saw headline after headline roll out about the increase in prices, not only in oil, not only in gas, but the big spike in natural gas and propane costs," said Gearity, a 58-year-old retired lawyer.

The project, proposed by Bluewater Wind, would include between 60 and 200 wind turbines spaced about a half mile apart. Delmarva Power has agreed to buy electricity from the project for 25 years. Bluewater is owned by the global investment firm Babcock & Brown, which operates wind farms in several states.

Setting it up

For each turbine, a pole would be hammered about 90 feet below the seabed floor. Another pole would rise above the water with three 140-foot spinning blades at the top. At the highest point, the turbines would reach up about 400 feet; by comparison, the Washington Monument is about 555 feet.

Unlike its mid-Atlantic neighbor, the Cape Cod project has faced vocal and well-funded opponents who complained it would mar the ocean vista. Rising energy prices have made that argument less persuasive, said Barbara Hill, executive director of Clean Power Now, an independent Hyannis, Mass.-based organization that favors the project.

The 130-turbine project has now cleared most of the regulatory hurdles and proponents are hopeful it will be in operation within four years.

Cape Wind Associates, a subsidiary of the New England power company Energy Management Inc., has spent more than \$30 million on the Massachusetts project, investing profits from its natural gas-fired power plants, said Cape Wind spokesman Mark Rodgers.

An opportunity

In New Jersey, Daniel Cohen, the president of the offshore wind developer Fishermen's Energy, said the organization reassessed its opposition, deciding to view offshore wind as an opportunity, not a threat.

"The public has a heightened interest to finding solutions in what it sees as a growing problem in our dependence on fossil fuels," said Cohen, who owns Atlantic Capes Fisheries in Cape May, N.J. Fishing company owners have put up the money for the project's development stage.

Significant obstacles to offshore wind still remain.

Policymakers and utility companies need to commit to long-term contracts, said Firestone, the University of Delaware professor. He pointed out that New Jersey and Rhode Island still do not have buyers for the power from the proposed projects.

There also needs to be more stability in the federal government's support for wind power, said Laurie Jodziewicz, manager of siting policy at the American Wind Energy Association. When Congress allowed a renewable energy tax credit to expire in the past -- in 2000, 2002 and 2004 -- wind capacity installation

dropped 93 percent, 73 percent and 77 percent respectively from the previous year. A current tax credit is set to expire Dec. 31.

Proponents point out that most of the technology hurdles have been cleared, though costs remain high. They look at the almost 1,100 megawatts of offshore wind farms in European waters and say the Cape Cod and projects could jump-start offshore wind energy in the United States.

"This will be a game-changer once this project is built," said Hill, the Cape Wind advocate. "We are going to be dancing on Craigsville Beach someday, looking out and seeing the turbines spinning."

State-by-state summary of offshore wind proposals

A summary of the proposed offshore wind projects in the United States:

MASSACHUSETTS Cape Wind Associates proposed a 130-turbine project in 2001 to be located five miles offshore in Nantucket Sound. The wind farm, which would cost more than \$1 billion, would generate 75 percent of the electricity needs for the Cape, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Politicians and residents have tried hard to block the 420-megawatt project, arguing it would hurt the fishing and tourism industries and mar ocean views. Cape Wind hopes the wind farm will be operational by the end of 2011.

Blue H USA has proposed a deep-water wind project that would place 120 wind turbines 23 miles off the coast of Martha's Vineyard. Massachusetts' congressional delegation recently urged the federal government to approve a lease for the 420-megawatt project. The deep-water technology is largely untested.

DELAWARE

After rate caps on electricity prices for Delmarva Power customers were lifted in 2006, the state requested proposals for projects that would provide stable-priced energy, reduce environmental impacts and adopt new and emerging technologies. In June, Delmarva Power agreed to buy up to 200 megawatts of electricity for 25 years from a proposed wind project located about 11.5 miles offshore. The project would consist of between 60 and 200 turbines and generate between 200 and 600 megawatts. The average Delmarva customer would pay \$0.70 more a month on average over 25 years, according to a July report from an independent consultant hired by the state. That number is significantly lower than initially predicted, in part because of projected increase in natural gas prices and compliance costs for reducing carbon dioxide pollution, the report said. At 450-megawatt capacity, the project would cost about \$1.5 billion. The project developer, Bluewater Wind, expects to provide electricity by 2012.

MARYLAND

Gov. Martin O'Malley said in July that he supports Delaware's Bluewater project. If Maryland were to buy power from the Bluewater wind farm, the company would need to build a larger park, which would make the project more viable. Bluewater said it is currently working with Maryland officials to investigate potential electricity buyers.

RHODE ISLAND

The state announced in April it was soliciting bids for an offshore wind farm with a 450-megawatt capacity -- enough to generate about 15 percent of the state's total electricity use. The state received seven bids and is expected to make a decision this fall.

NEW JERSEY

The state imposed a 15-month freeze on offshore wind projects in 2004 after a 350-megawatt project was proposed off the state's coast. A panel concluded in 2006 that the state should consider launching a limited and carefully monitored offshore test project. Five companies have submitted bids for a 350-megawatt project. The state is expected to choose a bidder this fall.

NEW YORK

A 2003 plan to install 40 wind turbines about 3.5 miles off the Long Island coast met significant opposition over concerns about the environmental and visual impact, and rising cost estimates. The project, which would have had a 140-megawatt capacity, was scrapped in 2007.

-- Associated Press

On the Net:

American Wind Energy Association: <http://www.awea.org/>

Bluewater Wind: <http://www.bluewaterwind.com/>

Cape Wind: <http://www.capewind.org/>

Fishermen's Energy: <http://www.fishermensenergy.com/>

Energy Department: <http://www1.eere.energy.gov/windandhydro/>

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