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Ocean seen as fertile field for wind farms

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Some call the waters off the nation's northeast coast the Saudi Arabia of wind for their potential to provide massive amounts of energy to the region.

Yet even talk of placing huge turbines in shallow waters off scenic shores can raise an enormous public outcry.

Behind the scenes in the U.S. and in Europe, the race is on to build the world's first deep-water wind farms, which would operate on floating platforms in waters hundreds of feet deep, like oil rigs found in the North Sea and Gulf of Mexico.

There are gargantuan technical hurdles involved, but there is also the potential for a huge payoff, said Habib Dagher, who is working on a deep-water wind turbine at the University of Maine.

"We can open up the largest renewable resource that the U.S. has," he said.

About 78% of the nation's electricity is consumed by people on the East and West coasts and along the Great Lakes, all places with enormous wind resources.

The potential in the U.S. and elsewhere has drawn a number of players into the race.

Boston-based **Blue H USA** is seeking permission to put a demonstration floating turbine in federal waters 23 miles off the coast of Massachusetts' Martha's Vineyard.

Blue H's affiliate, Blue H Technologies in Denmark, has a 2/3 -scale demonstration turbine operating off southern Italy and has proposed a full-scale prototype off France. It is also part of a consortium of companies that has proposed building a wind farm on floating platforms in the North Sea, with the first turbines being built as soon as 2013.

Elsewhere, the Norwegian company Statoil-Hydro is building a pilot wind turbine to be installed off Norway next year and tested over a two-year period. Statoil-Hydro says the windmill will be able to be tethered in depths from 350 feet to more than 2,000 feet.

Another Norwegian company, Sway, has designed a turbine for offshore use that has no platform and would be tethered to the ocean floor.

Texas oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens has brought attention to wind power with a plan for large-scale

projects in the Midwest.

Land-based wind turbines this year will supply 48 billion kilowatt-hours of power in the U.S., enough to meet the electricity needs of 4.5 million homes, according to the American Wind Energy Assn.

But it makes more sense to look out to sea, where the nation's best winds are found near densely populated regions, said Raymond Dackerman, general manager of **Blue H USA**.

"With all due respect to North Dakota and South Dakota, which have also been labeled the Saudi Arabia of wind, people live along our coastlines," Dackerman said. "It's relatively easier to cable back in from offshore locations into demand centers as opposed to creating projects in locations that are far from population centers."

Europe already has shallow-water wind farms, mostly off Denmark and Britain. And the United States' first ocean-based wind farms are expected to begin operating in shallow waters off Atlantic coast states in coming years.

Erecting wind turbines in shallow-water sites is relatively simple. Huge steel stakes are driven into the ocean bottom to ground turbines.

But that's not feasible farther offshore, where winds are stronger.

Winds in the Gulf of Maine blow at 20 to 22 mph on average, compared with wind speeds of 15 1/2 to 18 1/2 mph in the Midwest, Dagher said. Though the difference may not seem great, those offshore winds can produce 2 1/2 times the electricity of land-based turbines.

Placing turbines far offshore also eliminates the eyesore factor for people who might object to large towers in their view, he said.

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