

Virginia makes pitch for offshore winds project

STEVE SZKOTAK - Associated Press Writer - Associated Press

Virginia is making the case to the federal government that it's a great place to put offshore wind turbines to the test with a \$60 million to \$80 million demonstration center.

The state made the pitch this week to the U.S. Department of Energy, which is considering proposals to develop a center where wind turbines would undergo engineering and operational tests. The proposed Virginia test location is in the Hampton Roads area.

While offshore winds have been used widely and for many years in Northern Europe, the U.S. this year approved its first offshore wind farm, in Massachusetts. Besides lagging in technology and manufacturing facilities, the U.S. wind industry will face different climate conditions.

The demonstration project would place fixed offshore wind turbines in three locations in shallow to intermediate waters. They would be located at the Monitor-Merrimac Memorial Bridge-Tunnel, near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel and near the Chesapeake Light in waters off the bay's entrance.

In its filing with the Energy Department, Gov. Bob McDonnell's energy adviser said the state is working to start the leasing process of tracts 12 miles off Virginia Beach and that the energy program has widespread political, environmental, academic and business support. Four energy companies have expressed interest in developing wind farms off the coast.

Maureen Matsen writes that a consortium promoting offshore wind energy has found that Virginia has "a strong potential with Class 6 winds, water depths under 30 meters, and ready access to the high-voltage electric transmission grid."

Matsen also submitted a report by "Virginia offshore wind stakeholders" that argue the case for the state to be home to the demonstration center. Other Mid-Atlantic states are competing.

"Hampton Roads is uniquely set up to actually create a staged series of test pads, starting with relatively benign conditions and close access to industry, then moving into truly oceanic waters," said George Hagerman, director of offshore wind research for the Virginia Coastal Energy Research Consortium.

"We wanted to sort of paint that picture for them — here is how it can be done."

The Virginia demonstration project would assess how fixed wind turbines would withstand tropical storms, their impact on birds in the busy Atlantic flyway, and their compatibility with the large military presence in the Hampton Roads area.

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Naval Station Norfolk, the world's largest naval base, and a NASA facility on the Eastern Shore have national security and testing interests in Virginia's offshore waters.

But the military's huge presence in the region makes offshore wind turbines particularly enticing with the military seeking to achieve the goal by 2025 of using 25 percent renewable energy. The Navy is even more ambitious, seeking to achieve 50 percent renewable energy by 2020 for its land-based operations.

Hagerman said the demonstration would be key to attracting investors to an environmentally friendly but costly energy source with a long regulatory process.

"Before you put 100, 150 turbines out there you would really want to know that that turbine can survive and produce the way you expect it will," he said. "Otherwise that investment might be the commercial success it might be."

VCERC also financed research released this week on birds in offshore waters. It concluded more research is needed on the behavior of birds to assess risks posed by towering wind farms and their spinning blades, which are hundreds of feet across.

The study was conducted by Virginia Tech scientist Sarah M. Karpanty.

Little is known about the behavior of birds 12 miles offshore and Karpanty raised several approaches to monitor their activities, such as remote sensors and satellite imagery. Under the National Environmental Policy Act, threatened and endangered species are protected.

Hagerman said wind towers posing a threat to any of the endangered or threatened birds off the Virginia coast "could be a showstopper" for a project.

Environmental groups have filed a legal challenge to the wind farm off Massachusetts' Cape Cod, alleging that the 130 turbines planned for Nantucket Sound will endanger protected migratory birds and whales.

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