Wind Farm that Had Fire Is Industry Pioneer

AUDREY McAVOY - Associated Press - Associated Press

The wind farm on Oahu's North Shore that suffered a fire this week is an industry pioneer that uses storage batteries to even out the electricity it supplies.

Energy Secretary Steven Chu two years ago hailed the project as having the potential to set an example for other wind developers around the nation. The department guaranteed a $117 million loan to Kahuku Wind Power for facility's construction.

On Wednesday, flames destroyed the building housing the farm's batteries. The structure was still emitting heat and smoke the next day.

Jeff Mikulina, president of the Blue Planet Foundation, a Honolulu-based nonprofit organization that promotes renewable energy, said the fire is a setback but he says technology can take a couple steps forward, a couple steps back as it evolves.

He noted an earlier wind farm that started operation in 1980 about a mile from Kahuku Wind once had the world's largest wind turbine. This wind farm shut down in 1996, but it still contributed to the industry.

"Hawaii is an innovator in this field. Failures are part of the innovation and learning process," said Mikulina. "The lessons we're learning may help advance clean energy globally."

He said wind power will continue to be key for Hawaii, especially given its cost competitive with fossil fuels and because Hawaii's tradewinds provide it with a fairly steady and predictable supply of wind.

A state law passed in 2009 requires Hawaii's electric utilities companies to get 40 percent of their power from renewable source by 2030.

First Wind, the Boston company that runs the wind farm, said it would keep going with the project.

"We are determined to find the cause of this incident, take the necessary corrective measures, and get this wind project back in operation," Kekoa Kaluhiwa, First Wind director of external affairs, said in a statement.

It will take time for technical experts and fire inspectors to enter the building because of the structural damage and remaining smoke, he said.

The battery technology allows the wind farm to supply power even when wind levels drop. This is especially useful on islands like Oahu, where electricity grids are self-contained.

But the technology is so new, it likely wouldn't have been built without the loan guarantee.

Paul Gaynor, the CEO of the parent company First Wind Holdings, told reporters when the guarantee was finalized in 2010 that commercial lenders and investors hadn't been willing to fund the new battery technology.

Honolulu Fire Capt. Terry Seelig said the department would not only work with the company to find out what started the fire but also let others know how similar events can be prevented as others begin to use the technology.

"Whatever we learn here will definitely be shared with the fire service community as well as the wind energy community and hopefully that will add to the safety and efficiency of similar operations," he said.

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