

Va. aims to clear way for offshore wind projects

STEVE SZKOTAK - Associated Press - Associated Press

Virginia is seeking to survey a vast expanse of the ocean floor and document wind, waves and wildlife offshore to smooth the way for development of wind turbines by energy companies.

The proposed exploration 27 miles off Virginia Beach encompasses 113,000 acres, or 133 square miles, in the federally designated wind development area. Eight companies have expressed an interest in building towering turbines there to capture wind for energy. The eight include Dominion Virginia Power, the state's largest utility, as well as international interests.

The Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy is proposing two initiatives. One seeks proposals by Oct. 17 to survey the ocean bottom to determine if it can hold massive support structures for wind turbines, which would rise hundreds of feet above the surface. The other involves building platforms along the edges of the commercial lease area.

The so-called metocean platforms would use instruments and human observers to map and measure wind speeds and direction, water levels, and bird and bat activity.

The initiatives are intended to spare developers the preliminary steps needed to create wind farms in offshore tracts overseen by the U.S. Department of the Interior and to create an environment for energy companies to move forward with wind energy plans, state officials said.

Companies already face daunting costs to develop wind energy in an ocean environment, such as the design and manufacture of turbine and blade components and ships to deliver and install them.

"If you don't know what is on the ocean floor, then your risk is exacerbated by that lack of knowledge," said Maureen Matsen, Gov. Bob McDonnell's top energy adviser and a member of a state authority promoting offshore development.

"That's what this is really about. It's about eliminating the uncertainty and reducing the risk."

Matsen said the ocean bottom survey would be the first ever in those waters.

While the U.S. lags the rest of the world in offshore wind development, the industry has seen some promising signs.

No commercial wind power is produced in waters off the U.S., although a project off Cape Cod, Mass., could begin producing electricity in 2014. A project known as the

Va. aims to clear way for offshore wind projects

Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

Atlantic Wind Connection, backed by Internet giant Google and other investors, is moving forward with the construction of a 380-mile power line that would enable up to 7,000 megawatts of electricity to be produced at offshore wind farms from Virginia to New Jersey.

Wind power advocates have said Virginia is uniquely positioned to nurture the industry because of the relatively shallow waters offshore and strong winds. It also has the coastal infrastructure — a shipbuilding industry and a deepwater port — to allow for building and delivering turbines. Studies have forecast the creation of thousands of jobs as an offshore wind industry is developed.

"I think everyone in the industry has recognized the high cost is the real barrier right now," Matsen said. "Everyone is looking for ways to bring costs down."

Dominion's senior vice president for alternative energy solutions, Mary C. Doswell, said the research will help companies seeking a stake in offshore wind energy.

"The survey will expedite the evaluation of the sea floor under the development area and will reduce the cost for whichever company is chosen to develop a wind farm," she said.

Matsen said the geological survey would be financed by \$300,000 in state funds and matched by the Interior Department.

The state is seeking to secure leases from the agency to record environmental data on the north and south ends of the leasing area. Nine teams have put forth proposals on the research platforms. Funding has not been secured yet.

Al Christopher, director of the division of energy with the state DMME, echoed Matsen's comments — that public-private partnerships can help move forward offshore development. He wrote in an email that the data gathered will help the industry more quickly develop.

—

Steve Szkotak can be reached on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/sszkotakap>

Source URL (retrieved on 12/20/2014 - 6:45am):

http://www.chem.info/news/2012/09/va-aims-clear-way-offshore-wind-projects?qt-most_popular=1