Va. moving to speed offshore wind development(2)

STEVE SZKOTAK - Associated Press - Associated Press

The federal government cleared the way Thursday for Virginia to seek a research lease in its Atlantic coastal areas to help speed the development of offshore wind turbines.

The move would allow for greater study of wind, waves and wildlife in a 130-square-mile set aside for wind development. The announcement by U.S. Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management was welcomed by Gov. Bob McDonnell, energy companies and proponents of clean energy.

"The quicker the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy can study our coastal areas for their wind energy potential, the sooner private companies can gain the data they need to move forward," McDonnell said in a statement.

Bidding is expected later this year by up to 10 energy companies interested in building wind farms in the federally designated leasing area 27 miles off Virginia Beach. The companies include Energy Management Inc., developer of the nation's first offshore wind project off Massachusetts' Cape Cod, and Dominion Virginia Power, the state's largest electric utility.

The data collected by research platforms positioned in the northern and southern portions of the leasing area are critical to developing wind energy and spares energy companies the cost of gathering the information. Besides wind and waves, the platforms would also gather information on birds and bats, which are potentially threatened by rotating blades of wind turbines rising hundreds of feet above the ocean surface.

Virginia is also partnering with a company that will survey the ocean bottom.

The offshore leasing area was carved out of the busy Atlantic waters following negotiations involving the Navy, Coast Guard and port officials, among others.

Advocates of offshore wind power say the relatively shallow waters off Virginia are optimal for development and its port and shipbuilding industry offer an ideal platform to build and launch the towering turbines and blades that convert wind to energy.

Studies have estimated that the development of a wind industry on the outer continental shelf would create in the range of 10,000 jobs in Virginia. The U.S. has virtually no manufacturing base for the big components needed to withstand the ocean environment because much of the industry has been developed elsewhere such as in northern Europe and China.

Richmond-based Dominion has expressed its interest in developing the entire lease area, which it has said has the potential of generating 1,500 to 2,000 megawatts of electricity, enough energy to power 500,000 households. A spokesman for the utility said the research planned by Virginia "keeps the momentum going" toward offshore wind development.

"Any information gained and shared through the installation of meteorological towers or other monitoring equipment will benefit offshore wind development in Virginia," Dominion's Jim Norvelle said.

Glen Besa of the Virginia Sierra Club said offshore winds have the potential to displace coal and natural gas. "Facing up to the need to address climate change, we need to make this transition sooner rather than later," he said.

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

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