Interior Chief Sees Many Wind Farms in U.S. Future

MATTHEW DALY - Associated Press - Associated Press

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar voiced optimism Friday that the nation's first offshore wind farm will soon break ground after more than a decade of delays and be followed by more off the Atlantic coast.

"I think there's a good chance it will happen before the end of the year," Salazar said of the Cape Wind project. Speaking in an AP interview a few weeks before he leaves office, he also claimed gains as secretary in tightening oversight of offshore drilling after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. "I think the coziness with industry that was there when I came into the department is gone," he said.

A former U.S. senator from Colorado, the 58-year-old Salazar ran the Interior Department throughout President Barack Obama's first term.

Along with changes at the offshore drilling agency, Salazar pushed for renewable energy such as solar and wind power and helped to settle a longstanding dispute with American Indians.

The Interior Department manages more than 500 million acres in national parks and other public lands, as well as more than 1 billion acres offshore. The department oversees energy, mining operations and recreation and provides services to 566 federally recognized Indian tribes.

Under Salazar's watch, Interior authorized more than 40 solar, wind and geothermal energy projects on public lands that officials say will provide enough electricity to power more than 4 million homes.

Salazar called his four-year tenure a "joyful journey" that took him from the Everglades to the Arctic. Still, he said he was eager to return to his family and his Colorado ranch.

He spoke of progress in the long-delayed Cape Wind project off the Massachusetts coast because developers have agreements with utilities to purchase about 75 percent of the power the project is expected to generate and are working to get more. The $2.6 billion project off Cape Cod was the first offshore project to win a federal lease when Salazar gave his approval in 2010.

But the project has stalled because of lawsuits and difficulties obtaining financing. Developers plan to build 130 turbines in Nantucket Sound, but they've faced bitter opposition since they first proposed the project in 2001.

Opponents have filed several pending lawsuits and argue the project will ruin the

pristine sound and endanger marine traffic and animal life. They also say the project's electricity is significantly overpriced and a terrible deal for ratepayers.

Cape Wind says the cost is worth the project's benefits, including jobs, decreased pollution and the creation of a reliable power source near a busy coastline.

Salazar said the delays and lawsuits that have plagued Cape Wind illustrate the difficulty of developing new energy sources. Regulatory improvements made in recent years should help other offshore projects follow more quickly, he said.

"Nobody had really focused on offshore wind energy until President Obama came into office," he said. "Cape Wind wasn't even processed under the authority of this department. They ended up in this morass where it took them 10 years to work through that process."

Now, with so-called wind energy zones designated in the Atlantic Ocean, a host of wind farms should crop up from Maine to Virginia, Salazar said. "We're very, very excited by the progress that has been made and we look forward to a robust offshore wind industry in the Atlantic."

On offshore drilling, Salazar defended the unprecedented shutdown of offshore drilling after the BP spill. In office, he also renamed and revamped the agency that oversees offshore drilling after the April 2010 explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig, which killed 11 workers and led to the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history.

Business groups and Gulf Coast political leaders said the six-month shutdown crippled the oil and gas industry and cost thousands of jobs. Salazar said the moratorium was the right decision.

Now, regulators "are being a lot smarter about what we lease" on the Outer Continental Shelf, he said. "We are making sure that people are kept accountable and that problems are detected and fixed as rapidly as possible."

Salazar disputed claims by some environmental groups that the changes have not gone far enough to change a culture at the drilling agency that often favored industry.

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