Va. Offshore Advocates Seek to Speed Process

STEVE SZKOTAK, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — With a September auction set for nearly 113,000 offshore acres devoted to wind development, wind power advocates are working to hasten the construction of wind turbines that could supply power to 700,000 Virginia homes and at a price ratepayers can afford.

The Virginia Offshore Wind Development Authority met Wednesday to discuss strategies to achieve those goals, from documenting wind speeds in an energy development area nearly 25 miles off Virginia Beach to mapping the contours of the ocean floor where turbines towering 700 feet from the floor would be planted.

The meeting came two days after the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management scheduled the Sept. 4 auction for energy companies to bid on a lease for the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean set aside for wind farms. Eight energy companies have qualified to bid on the ocean tract.

The authority and its industry counterpart, the Virginia Offshore Wind Coalition, are aiming to provide the eight companies with information they can use to speed along the construction of wind turbines, which they say will create a new industrial base and thousands of jobs. Estimates now put their construction six or more years away.

"This is a multibillion dollar business," said Bob Mathias, chairman of the authority, which was created to promote an offshore wind industry. "Each windmill is $20-25 million, so they need that kind of information before they make their investment."

Some of the work is under way.

With state and federal financing, Fugro Geotechnics and Survey has been scanning the ocean floor. Its final report is due in early September.

"This is giving them some idea of what the subsurface looks like," said Sally McNeilan, who is affiliated with Fugro and the coalition. "It isn't all sand out there."

The ocean floor, she said, contains deep channeling that is a remnant of the ice age and rivers that once flowed where the coast was. That information is critical for energy companies that will use the ocean floor to anchor turbines with blades nearly the length of a football field.

"It's a tremendous amount of data and information that the bidders can look at and get some idea of the challenges they're going to be facing," McNeilan said. "When you're out there and you're only looking at the surface of the ocean, you have no idea of what lies below."

While the coalition not settled on a number, McNeilan told the authority it will likely

seek in the range of $4 million in the next state budget to further research.

"Our goal with the funding is to shorten the time line and make the Virginia wind energy area and the port of Virginia more desirable for development," she said.

Advocates say Virginia's port facilities and underused shipbuilding industry are key assets to develop a supply chain for the wind industry. First, however, the U.S. must attract the manufacturers that are now primarily based in Europe, which has a huge advantage over the U.S. in terms of wind energy. The U.S. still doesn't have an offshore wind farm.

Dominion Virginia Power is among the eight companies qualified to bid on Sept. 4, and the utility's executive for alternative energy said the economies of scale are critical to wind power's success.

Mary C. Doswell, a Dominion senior vice president, said it's critical for the U.S. — not just Virginia — to attract the wind power industries.

"It has to be larger scale because the final step on cost reduction is bringing the supply chain to the U.S.," said Doswell, a member of the authority. "We're not going to gain that efficiency and cost-reduction until we can get the supply chain here."

But the question is how can you attract the supply chain when there is nothing to supply?

Doswell said Dominion has made a small step in that direction by partnering with a turbine manufacture for testing off the coast.

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