

BOEM finalizes Wind Energy Areas in Oregon

February 17, 2024



Development of wind energy projects off the southern Oregon Coast is one step closer to reality.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) announced Tuesday, Feb. 12, two proposed projects, one offshore at Coos Bay, and the other off shore at Brookings, have been finalized.

The BOEM said the projects support the Biden-Harris administration's goals for deploying 30 gigawatts (GW) of offshore wind energy capacity by 2030 and 15 GW of floating offshore wind energy capacity by 2035.

The WEAs were developed following extensive engagement and feedback from the state, Tribes, local residents, ocean users, federal government partners, and other members of the public. The final WEAs are based on reducing potential conflicts of ocean users, particularly on commercial fishing.

But during public meetings in 2023 in Brookings and Coos Bay, locals voiced opposition and concern about the projects.

One of his biggest concerns is how the construction and placement of turbines would impact the ecosystem and fishing grounds in the areas.

Charleston commercial fisherman Nick Edwards said the Oregon Coast offers a great place to fish because of its abundance of species. He's worried that could be lost to floating offshore wind.

"We don't want the demise of our ecosystem to be the unintended consequences of offshore wind," he said.

County commissioners from Coos, Curry and Douglas counties passed proclamations opposing the floating offshore wind turbines.

John Sweet, one of three Coos County commissioners, said although he helped pass a county proclamation opposing the potential for floating offshore wind, he is still undecided.

“I grew up right on the coast,” he said. “I worked in the ocean transportation business for almost 40 years. So I’m aware of the ocean conditions here and that gave rise to some concern that this might not work.”

The two WEAs total approximately 195,012 acres and they avoid 98% of the areas recommended for exclusion due to their importance as commercial fishing grounds. The Coos Bay WEA is 61,204 acres and is located 32 miles from shore. The Brookings WEA is 133,808 acres and is about 18 miles from shore. A map of the final WEAs can be found on BOEM’s website.

“BOEM values its close coordination with the State of Oregon as we continue to work together to maintain a robust and transparent offshore wind planning process,” BOEM Director Elizabeth Klein said in a release. “We will continue to work closely with Tribal governments, federal and state government agencies, ocean users, coastal communities and all interested stakeholders as we move forward with our environmental review.”

On Feb. 14, 2024, BOEM will publish a notice in the Federal Register announcing its intent to prepare an environmental assessment of potential impacts from offshore wind leasing in the WEAs. The notice will initiate a 30-day public comment period. Another public comment period would occur if BOEM decides to move forward with a lease sale in either of the WEAs.

In addition to engaging with the State, Tribes, coastal communities and ocean users, BOEM partnered with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) to assess opportunities for wind energy development and reduce or avoid impacts on other important ocean uses in Oregon.

The agencies developed a comprehensive, ecosystem-based ocean planning model that leverages the best available data on natural resources, ocean industries like fisheries and energy production, and areas of national security activities to identify areas with high wind energy resource potential and fewer potential impacts to other ocean users and sensitive environmental resources, according to a release from BOEM.

“This comprehensive approach provided valuable insights about the seascape and its uses and facilitated greater transparency and positive coordination with government partners and ocean stakeholders through direct engagement and incorporation of their feedback into the NCCOS model,” the BOEM stated.

On Aug.15, 2023, BOEM announced a public comment period on two draft WEAs located offshore southern Oregon. The draft WEAs covered approximately 219,568 acres, with their closest points to land ranging from approximately 18 – 32 miles. The draft WEAs represented a subset of the original 1,159,298 acres (1,811 square miles) that the Department of the Interior identified for public comment in April 2022.

Since the start of the Biden-Harris administration, the Department of the Interior has approved the nation's first six commercial-scale offshore wind energy projects. BOEM has held four offshore wind lease auctions, which have brought in almost \$5.5 billion in high bids, including a record-breaking sale offshore New York and New Jersey and the first-ever sales offshore the Pacific and Gulf of Mexico coasts.

BOEM officials said the agency is exploring additional opportunities for offshore wind energy development in the U.S., including in the Gulf of Maine and the U.S. Central Atlantic coast. The agency also continues to take steps to evolve its approach to offshore wind to drive towards union-built projects and a domestic-based supply chain.

For more information about Oregon activities, visit BOEM's website.

The Oregon Capital Chronicle contributed to this report.