

Wind Energy: OSU to launch \$2.5M study to gain coastal community reaction

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The U.S. Department of Energy has selected a team of researchers led by Oregon State University to receive up to \$2.5 million to study what coastal communities think of potential offshore wind energy development and the benefits they could gain from those projects.

The funding will be administered by the Pacific Marine Energy Center, a consortium of universities led by OSU that works closely with coastal communities, ocean users, government agencies and technology developers for the responsible development of marine renewable energy.

The federal government is in the early stages of leasing areas off the coasts of Oregon, California and Maine for floating offshore wind energy projects. In lieu of requiring companies to pay the full lease cost to the federal treasury, the government may allow developers to establish agreements with coastal communities about specific community benefits the companies would provide.

Researchers will interview and survey coastal residents in an effort to understand the preferences, concerns and values of local communities where offshore wind development has been proposed, said lead researcher Hilary Boudet, an associate professor of sociology in OSU's College of Liberal Arts.

Based on existing projects in Europe, Boudet said, community benefits offered by developers could include apprenticeships or traineeships for local residents to be employed in the offshore wind energy sector; funds for services such as child care, health care or education initiatives; climate resiliency and environmental restoration efforts; or a general fund for the community to use on a variety of projects.

"We're trying to get the perspectives of the people who will be most affected by development, if it occurs, and then we want to go back over time to see if perceptions change," Boudet said.

Boudet's co-lead researcher at OSU is Shawn Hazboun, assistant professor of sociology. OSU is partnering on the project with the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, Renewable Northwest and Sea Grant programs in Oregon, Washington and Maine. The research team includes Jeremy Firestone at the University of Delaware, Teresa Johnson and Caroline Noblet at the University of Maine, Arne Jacobson at Cal Poly Humboldt and Shana Hirsch at the University of Washington.

The team will also investigate how the community benefit model has worked in other locations and will present their findings to the coastal communities being surveyed in Oregon, California and Maine so those residents understand what's possible in this type of agreement.

This project will help the Pacific Marine Energy Center understand what responsible development of the offshore energy sector looks like from the community perspective, rather than viewing it solely through the lens of science or technology, center director Bryson Robertson said.

"So often, our attention as we assess potential energy technologies is focused on the electricity and environment, and we sort of ignore the social and human aspects," he said. "This funding really allows us to put those social aspects front and center and look at it from a more holistic viewpoint."

Even the question of which communities are within the sphere of impact is a challenging question, Robertson said. Floating offshore wind energy projects are typically far out to sea, though they are large structures — some as tall as the Eiffel Tower — and can be visible from land under clear conditions.

There is concern among tribal communities that offshore development could impact traditional fishing zones or other areas of cultural significance, Boudet said. Development could also affect transportation lanes, the fishing industry at large and coastal viewsheds.

The researchers will report back to the communities they're studying to share their findings as they go.

"I see what we're doing as being useful for communities and for government officials at the federal, state, county and local level, as well as for tribal governments," Boudet said. "Communities can start to align and come together and maybe build capacity to negotiate with developers for benefits if that opportunity arises."

The information will also be useful for potential developers, who need to better understand community needs for their projects to be successful, Robertson said.

“We’ve looked at how we built energy infrastructure over the last 100 years and it’s created a lot of negative impacts for local communities while benefits are being accrued by people far away. We need to change that paradigm,” he said. “We really need to make sure that, if development proceeds, those who are impacted do see some of the benefits.”

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