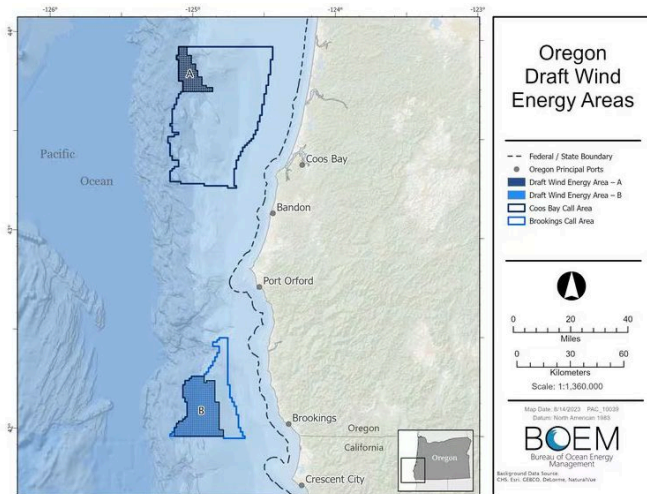


Coast Wind Farms: Officials, locals worry about foggy federal plans

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The sun was peeking through the clouds during a short break in the rain as Nick Edwards was making his way along the Charleston Marina.

Edwards fished along the Oregon Coast for more than 40 years and now owns an 80-foot trawler named the Carter Jon, which commercially fishes Dungeness crab and pink cocktail shrimp.

Near the ramp's entrance, Edwards ran into his captain, Jordan Murphy. The men exchanged keys, and the conversation quickly turned to floating offshore wind.

"We don't want that, that's my perspective," Murphy said. "It would be a lot of our [fishing] grounds."

Edwards has been spending a lot of time learning about the hundreds of thousands of acres off the coast of Coos Bay and Brookings where the federal government has pitched the idea of building floating wind turbines for renewable energy.

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

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.

It's a concern that's been steadily growing in coastal towns that would be most directly affected by any offshore wind project.

While the Biden administration has previously said offshore wind is one way the country can more quickly move away from fossil fuel for its energy needs, Oregonians are demanding answers even as the plan remains in its infancy. Others frustrated with the lack of research, transparency and engagement from the federal government are filling the information gap with their own answers.

The Biden administration announced a goal to create 45 gigawatts of offshore wind energy capacity in the United States by 2035. The announcement came with promises of tens of thousands of jobs and protection for ocean wildlife. The U.S. Department of Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, or BOEM, is the federal agency charged with identifying, proposing and leasing the ocean areas needed.

In August, after more than a year of gathering data, BOEM proposed more than 200,000 acres across two locations off the coast of Southern Oregon. The draft wind energy areas would begin about 13 miles offshore and stretch out to about 57 miles from each location.

Picking the potential location is the first step the agency must take before leasing the areas to a developer that would eventually build and install wind turbines.

The current draft wind energy areas are smaller than the original draft area announced in April, which was more than 1.1 million acres. BOEM cut the size of the area after the public complained it was too sprawling.

The recent draft prompted pushback from many local community members, receiving more than 1,100 public comments, as well as calls from Gov. Tina Kotek and state agencies that asked for more research on potential cultural, environmental and wildlife impacts.

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."

When Sweet first heard about the turbines, he thought they might be a good thing for the local community, as offshore wind could bring jobs and potentially cheaper electricity.

But he wondered how BOEM and potential developers would construct and maintain the turbines, as sea conditions like strong waves and wind currents, as well as salt-water corrosion, could damage electrical components and cables.

Like others, he also wondered about environmental impacts. Most importantly, he said, he wants to avoid big companies coming in and leaving — a cycle well known from the timber industry,

“It devastates the community,” he said. “We’ve been there and done that.”

Sweet recalls the aftermath of the timber industry in the 1980s when it would bring jobs and boost the local economy. After all the timber was harvested, he said, there was a “huge exodus” of jobs, leaving families and local businesses without livelihoods.

“I just don’t want to see another cycle like that where it’s a boom and then a bust, and I don’t think we know enough about this to risk that happening,” he said.

Lack of engagement

The Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians feel frustrated by the lack of answers, too.

In late October, the tribes passed a resolution opposing floating offshore wind, saying BOEM has repeatedly failed at consulting with the tribes to preserve fishing and other cultural resources.

The opposition wasn’t always the case, Tribal Council Chair Brad Kneaper said.

In 2020, the tribes had no firm position but asked to learn more about what environmental and cultural impacts could occur. In 2022, with still no answers, the tribes passed a resolution limiting their support.

“They’re required by federal law to consult with tribes,” Kneaper said. “I think they have the best intentions to do that as best they can, but they’re not able to.”

Kneaper said the tribes have provided written and verbal comments to BOEM, and have participated in meetings with the agency. Some of the concerns Kneaper has heard from tribal members is the height and potential placement of the floating wind turbines. Some worry the massive machines could destroy viewpoints that are culturally significant to the tribes.

Renewable energy shouldn’t do more harm than good to the current environment, the tribes said.

“Everything has a consequence,” Kneaper emphasized. “You may call a project a green energy project, a renewable energy project, but what’s the consequences of that? How do you weigh those consequences against the benefits and do the benefits outweigh the consequences?”

development process has led some residents to seek their own answers. Mike Graybill has been spending most of his time reading news articles and research about offshore wind from around the world, as he forecasts how those projects could play out in Southern Oregon. Graybill was a manager of the South Slough National Estuary Research Reserve in Charleston for 30 years before retiring.

“I felt compelled to do my own research because I had no basis for an opinion,” he said.

Graybill’s self-guided education has led him to give presentations on the South Coast to community members wanting to learn more. Their most common reaction is shock, he said.

“Nobody has an understanding of the scale and the nature of what’s involved. So anytime I’ve given a presentation, I’ve just shown people what it looks like and what’s involved in doing it,” he said. “When people see what’s involved in doing it in this community, they don’t want any part of it.”

In his opinion, floating offshore wind is not the right approach for renewable energy for Oregon. The state should focus on deploying more solar panels in vast, open farmland rather than deploying offshore wind turbines, he said.

“We really need to focus the conversation on climate, not on jobs and economy,” Graybill added. “If the conversation is pointed toward what’s the most appropriate role for the state of Oregon to play in this effort to decarbonize, then we should look at the full suite of renewable options and evaluate how Oregon can best contribute.”

Graybill isn’t the only one filling in the information gap.

Over the summer, the Oregon Natural Resources Industries, or ONRI, began sharing information on its Facebook page and website opposing floating offshore wind turbines. The group shares links to various news articles and blog posts that oppose offshore wind. It also shares infographics made by a member of its group attempting to describe some of the offshore wind technology, along with “No Windmills” posts and letters of opposition to lawmakers.

ONRI describes itself as a group that “supports, defends, and protects natural resource jobs, families and communities.” The group was founded as an offshoot of Timber Unity, a conservative group backed by the timber industry to oppose climate policies in Oregon. In 2019 and 2020, Timber Unity rallied truckers to the state Capitol to oppose a program for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and since then the group has inserted itself into other controversial political issues.

Jen Hamaker, president of ONRI, said her group’s position on offshore wind comes from the various research and articles that say how dangerous the technology could be to marine life, as well as speculated potential costs to local utility bills.

“We have all these different groups of people that are coming together for a goal of stopping these wind turbines,” she said. “We all have different reasons and because of that, this is the biggest groundswell of people that I’ve seen in a long time.”

No one from ONRI lives in Coos Bay or the other communities that would be most directly affected by offshore wind, though Hamaker notes her father was a fisherman off Oregon’s northern coast. Despite a lack of local connection, she said her group shares frustrations with area residents who want more answers from the federal government.

Before BOEM’s public comment deadline in October, Hamaker said she wrote and sent out proclamation guides for local county commissioners to use. She said proclamations are “an effective tool” that local governments can pass to represent the whole county rather than one public comment.

She and county commissioners agreed that the proclamations were not a deciding factor in Coos, Curry and Douglas county leaders opposing the federal proposal.

‘Can always do better’

Oregonians’ response to and engagement with the draft wind energy areas gathered the most comments out of the West Coast region, said Doug Boren, BOEM’s Pacific regional director.

“I think we’re getting the message out there that BOEM is here and we really do want the public input,” he said.

Boren admitted there could be more effort in communication and engagement, especially in explaining BOEM’s process.

“I know that I can always do better,” he said.

BOEM’s process is different from what South Coast Oregonians have been used to when large projects are proposed, Boren said, like the 229-mile Jordan Cove liquid natural gas pipeline project. Jordan Cove was set to become Oregon’ single largest emitter of greenhouse gases. After more than a decade of processes, permitting and federal environmental reviews, developers decided to pull the plug in late 2021, citing difficulty obtaining critical state permits to move forward.

In BOEM’s case, drafting the areas to propose a sale is the beginning of their process, Boren said. After proposing the sale, the lessee would do its own surveys of the area, submit a plan to BOEM and then conduct federal environmental reviews.

“That’s where I think some of the questions that stakeholders have [been asking] and the confusion that we’re not disclosing, it’s because we don’t know yet,” he said.

The agency understands people want to know more information before any sale takes place, Boren said, but once that information is available, the community will have another opportunity to submit public comments.

There are also stipulations in the next phase that require the lessee to communicate with local groups, like tribal nations and the fishing industry, so they can have more opportunities to provide input into the development of the plan.

The decision will not be made lightly, Boren said.

The transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is difficult to balance as there can be unintended consequences, especially for Indigenous, rural, low-income and people of color who are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis. It’s prompting researchers to look into how siting renewable energy projects, such as mining, transmission lines and ocean projects, could impact these people.

“It would be great if we could find an area with zero conflict off the coast of Oregon, but I think the reality is there’s probably no place with zero conflict,” Boren said.

If BOEM decides to move forward, it would be a decision made by both the agency and the state of Oregon. Right now, the agency is still reviewing all public comments and is working on a memo to show how BOEM took public comments into consideration as it moves forward.

As far as a timeline for next steps, Boren said the process “is going at the speed that it needs to go.”

Commission headquarters in Coos Bay, fisherman Nick Edwards recalled his last meeting with Boren. The meeting happened in the “war room,” as he called it, where all commission decisions are made.

“He sat right here actually, and he said he’s not going anywhere,” Edwards recalled.

The most important part of the process is sitting at the table with decision makers, Edwards said. Creating the opportunity for collaboration, transparency and accountability to come to a consensus for all parties is a difficult task, but Edwards believes it can be done.

After all, he said, that’s the Oregon way.

“For me, it’s not about whether we should have offshore wind, it’s the process [of] how we get there and that’s the biggest thing,” he said. “I’m not against offshore wind, I know that climate change is real, but how do you adjust to climate change?”

So far, people seeking answers to their questions have slowed down BOEM’s process, Edwards said, and he hopes it could eventually end in a way where everyone feels heard.

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