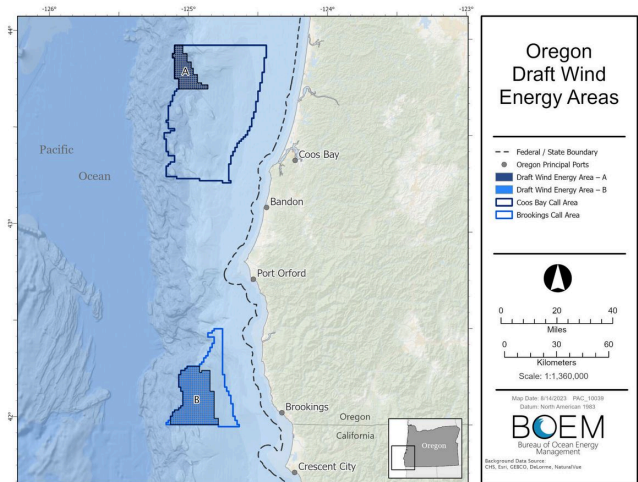


Wind Energy: BOEM holds third public meeting to introduce offshore wind energy plans

October 4, 2023



The Curry County Board of Commissioners is expected to review a federal proposal during the board's Oct. 4 public meeting, to establish ocean wind energy projects along the southern Oregon Coast.

Responding to public pressure to be more forthcoming, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) allowed a question-and-answer session at the federal agency's open house in Brookings held to acquaint the public with plans for an offshore wind farm about 20 miles offshore from Brookings and Coos Bay.

The four-hour event, held at Southwestern Oregon Community College, followed two similar meetings in Gold Beach and Coos Bay. Neither of those events had Q-and-A sessions although the ostensible purpose of the gatherings was to fulfill the sixty-day comment period requested by Gov. Tina Kotek in a letter to the BOEM. Public comments at the previous events in Gold Beach and Coos Bay were gathered on written forms.

Brookings meeting

At 4 p.m. September 28 doors opened in the Commons Room of Southwestern Oregon Community College Curry Campus. Six stations were set up, each staffed by BOEM experts and scientists working on the project. The stations offered opportunities to gather information on and discuss topics covering the BOEM and National Centers of Ocean Science process, state ocean energy policies, fishing data, natural resources and studies, visual simulations, and the public comments station.

After attendees had signed into the meeting, they had the opportunity to hear a 30-minute opening presentation by Doug Boren, Regional Director of the Pacific Region. He began by saying BOEM was “not here to advocate. We’re just here to let you know what we’ve learned and where we are in the process.” The opening presentation included briefings by several of the project’s process experts and scientists about their work and data. Immediately after those presentations, organizers opened the meeting for a question-and-answer session. It was scheduled for 20 minutes. It lasted over 90 minutes.

The mostly polite audience pointed out that the answers given to their questions and concerns about visual impacts to the area, fishing impacts, energy costs, threats to endangered species, and economic and environmental impacts received responses they considered vague and uncertain. Questions asked about dangers arising from earthquake faults along the coastal Tsunami zone were greeted with boisterous applause.

Leonard Krug, President of the Oregon Angler’s Alliance and Board Member of Oregon South Coast Fishermen, and a member of Pacific Fisheries management Council’s Habitat Advisory Committee said there are “too many unknowns” in the plan as it exists. In a statement published by the Oregon South Coast Fishermen the plans are referred to as “aspirational goals only, with little thought to where we are headed in regard to finances and the environment.”

Finances were a common subject of the questions directed to BOEM staff. Many concerned possible taxpayer liabilities and the fiscal soundness of potential leaseholders and their development and maintenance of the turbines. Others questioned the cost and impact of electric transmission onshore.

About 30 minutes into the Q&A, following summaries of the data gathered by the BOEM, Jim Harris, a resident of Brookings, asked whether the project had “gathered any human data.” He then asked the audience how many were opposed to the idea of the wind turbines off the Curry County coast. About 70 of the attendees raised their hands. When he asked how many were in favor, after a few moments three hands went up.

Following the recognition of the unity of disapproval, interrogations of BOEM became more challenging, and a few attendees expressed their opposition to the project as statements rather than questions, however the overwhelming demeanor remained polite and respectful while staunchly in opposition.

Questions were asked about what it would take for the BOEM to abandon plans for Brookings, noting that initially the “call area” was comprised of Brookings, Charleston and Bandon. Boren explained that while the Bandon call area was deemed unsuitable due to conflicts with commercial fishing and sensitive habitats, current plans were “nothing final now” and these plans are “just one tool in the toolbox.”

Boren also pointed out that the BOEM operates under a federal mandate, and that despite opposition from the public they are under a remit to proceed with what the Biden Administration describes in a press release as a strategy for “Wind Energy Areas off Every Coast: The Department of the Interior (DOI) released a first-ever offshore wind leasing strategy, which includes holding up to seven offshore wind lease sales by 2025.”

Several areas of inquiry, such as the impact of transmission lines onshore and the cost of electricity, were described by Boren as outside federal purview and within the jurisdiction of the state and local government.

Curry County Commissioners were expected to continue reviewing the offshore wind energy again at the board's Oct. 4 meeting, according to County Counsel Ted Fitzgerald.

“I think one of the biggest parts is we want the public to be able to weigh in themselves,” Fitzgerald said according to an article in the Wild Rivers Outpost.

Commissioners haven’t decided whether they will participate in the public comment period either for or against offshore wind energy at this point, Fitzgerald said. Commissioners Jay Trost and Brad Alcorn did attend the meeting, Alcorn saying that he hasn’t yet encountered any of his constituents who are in favor of the turbines in the Brookings call area.