
OPINION: Wind power is happening in Humboldt

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The Yurok Tribe sponsored a Tribal Offshore Wind Summit in Eureka on January 30th and 31st. Hundreds of attendees flooded the meeting hall to learn more about what is happening with offshore wind in Humboldt.

The Yurok Tribe has not taken a position for or against offshore wind, but they know that they need to be at the table. They wanted to have a conversation in their own space. The Tribe wants more than consultation. What they expect is an equal seat at the table. At this summit they brought the table into their own house.

Tribal Sovereignty

In 2023, the Tribal Energy Sovereignty Resolution was passed at the first ever En Banc meeting of Tribal Leaders, the California Energy Commission, and the California Public Utilities Commission.

This resolution committed to establish frameworks for greater collaboration, develop capacity-building and technical assistance resources, increase tribal set-asides and partner to pursue federal funding opportunities, prioritize community benefits, enhance land-use considerations in clean energy planning, and increase cultural awareness and knowledge of tribal priorities.

As a demonstration of their commitment to follow through on these promises, one of the first speakers at the summit was David Hochschild, Chairman of the California Energy Commission. He seemed sincerely interested in deferring to the advice and needs of the Yurok Tribe.

Firehose

I only attended the first day and it was a firehose of information. There was an impressive lineup of speakers, including Tribal leaders Phillip Williams, Frankie Myers, Joseph James, and Congressman Jared Huffman.

Valerie Starkey was the only Del Norte County Supervisor who attended. She wanted to learn more about offshore wind power to better evaluate what is best for our county.

There were presentations from local, state, and federal government agencies which are working on some aspect of offshore wind, including the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), US Department of

Energy, California Energy Commission, Schatz Energy Research Center, and the Humboldt Bay Harbor District.

They all spoke about the various steps necessary to have fully developed wind turbines off the coast of Humboldt. Humboldt has already had a lease sale and signed two leases in June 2023. This whole process could take 10 years.

Not So Fast

If there were ever a lease sale off the coast of Del Norte County, you could add the Humboldt time frame to the start of lease signing here. Not everyone understands that signing a lease for an area to develop offshore wind is just the beginning of a long and very thorough process.

Both Humboldt leaseholders gave presentations at this Summit. The first was RWE Global which owns and operates offshore wind turbines throughout the world. They described their timeline. It will take until 2030 for project development, including approval of operations plans and environmental impact studies.

Public input is built into this process, and the leaseholders must complete permitting before they can start to build anything. RWE projects construction will be completed, and operation will begin by early to mid-2030s. The other company, Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, says they will be operational by 2029.

Transmission Lines

Building offshore wind turbines would be pointless if there was not a way to ship the power out after it is brought to shore. To accomplish this, new high-capacity power lines must be built. It could take ten years to acquire rights of way, finance, design and construct this expanded grid capacity.

Arne Jacobson from Schatz Energy Research Center at Cal Poly Humboldt provided a perspective on grid planning. He described four possible routes for power export lines; 1) run a line east to connect inland, 2) run a line down Highway 101, 3) run an underwater cable south nearshore and 4) run an underwater cable offshore.

What I did not realize is that the Humboldt project will require two export transmission lines to ensure redundancy and reliable connectivity to the larger grid. Representatives from the US Department of Energy and Pacific Gas and Electric also spoke about grid planning. No one was suggesting a connection to Del Norte.

Humboldt Harbor

The Humboldt Harbor District just received a grant for \$426,719,810 from the federal infrastructure fund to pay for harbor upgrades to prepare them to build the floating offshore wind platforms. Parts will be shipped into the harbor and assembled at a defunct mill site on the Samoa peninsula. This project will create jobs.

In addition to the funds for construction, there is \$51 million for environmental restoration to clean up the mill site contamination, \$10 million for onsite solar, \$6 million for a Public Benefit Program for Tribes, fishermen and nearby residents and \$3 million for a dredge dewatering area.

This grant will also provide assorted millions for an eco-shoreline transition, a multipurpose trail adjacent to the site, and public recreation access including a fishing pier and kayak launch. The Humboldt Harbor District has embraced the opportunities presented by offshore wind, and they are reaping the benefits.

More to Come

After attending this Yurok Summit I have a new appreciation of the complexities of planning for offshore wind. There are many moving parts to keep track of and some of these decisions will affect us. In the long run it will pay off to monitor the progress in Humboldt County and see when there are opportunities to weigh in.

There are currently no plans for a lease sale offshore of Del Norte County, but the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) is initiating a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for the Morro Bay and Humboldt lease areas. They are seeking comments by February 20 on the scope of this study. (www.boem.gov/caoffshorepeis)

The California Energy Commission is circulating a draft strategic action plan for offshore renewable energy in California (efiling.energy.ca.gov) as required by Assembly Bill 525. Comments are due on this plan by March 22.

I have only scratched the surface of the activities that were presented at this meeting. In a future column, I will take a deep dive into the details of the AB 525 plan, BOEM leasing activities and what's next for offshore wind.

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