

U.S. to lease waters off Mid-Atlantic for wind farms

February 7 2012, By Timothy B. Wheeler

Lighting Maryland homes with power from giant turbines off Ocean City moved closer to reality Thursday, as federal officials announced they are ready to lease vast areas along the Mid-Atlantic coast for wind farms.

Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) said at a news conference that his staff found that no significant impact on the environment, shipping or other activities would come from letting developers begin studies on for harnessing ocean winds from New Jersey to Virginia.

Salazar, who pledged more than a year ago to streamline the regulatory process for putting turbines offshore, said the Bureau of [Ocean Energy](#) Management would start soliciting bids from potential developers for leasing up to 80,000 acres off Maryland. Eight companies or partnerships had expressed interest in 2010.

"So this is not going to be something that's going to be waiting around for multiple years," Salazar said. "We'll have those leases issued by the end of 2012."

It's still likely to be at least five years before construction begins, industry officials and supporters said, assuming the projects costing billions of dollars clear all the regulatory, political and economic hurdles still confronting them. But the federal government's favorable environmental review shortened the red tape by as much as two years, they said, since it meant a more detailed study is not needed at this time.

Once developers sign leases with the federal government, they'll be allowed to post buoys and towers offshore to measure winds and take other readings needed to plan and design their projects. Before starting construction, however, they'll have to perform detailed studies of the potential impact of the towering turbines on fish, birds, bats, shipping and other activities. The studies could take up to two years.

The area available off Maryland's coast would begin 10 nautical miles from the Ocean City beach and stretch 27 nautical miles out to sea.

Gov. Martin O'Malley, who was on hand for the announcement, called it "a very, very positive step forward." He is counting on offshore wind to help meet Maryland's goal of getting 20 percent of its power from renewable sources by 2022.

"The energy is there," the governor said. "We need the energy. ... We need the jobs, and we need a more renewable, cleaner greener future for our kids."

For now, O'Malley needs to persuade Maryland state legislators to back his latest proposal for giving financial incentives to develop offshore wind farms. After failing to get a bill through the Legislature last year, he has introduced another with a different approach, which would require Maryland electricity providers to get up to 2.5 percent of their power from turbines off the coast.

Abigail Hopper, the governor's energy advisor, said O'Malley's legislation would call for getting power from a wind farm of 310 megawatts' generating capacity. One or more projects that size should employ about 1,200 people for five years in making and assembling the turbines and related infrastructure, she said, then support about 250 permanent jobs maintaining the facilities.

Lawmakers balked last year over making Maryland residents pay more for their electricity to subsidize offshore wind farms. Offshore wind power could cost up to 20 cents per kilowatt-hour under the governor's bill, roughly double the current cost Baltimore Gas & Electric Co. customers now pay for power produced largely by burning coal. O'Malley's bill would cap the extra cost of offshore wind at no more than \$2 a month for households.

"This is a big, complicated undertaking," the governor said, "but one we must undertake."

O'Malley said he hopes the federal government might join with the states in pledging to buy power from offshore [wind farms](#), which would help developers secure the financing needed to go forward.

Salazar said that O'Malley had telephoned Navy Secretary Ray Mabus this week urging the service, which has bases in Virginia and Maryland, to consider making such a commitment. President Barack Obama said in his State of the Union speech that the Navy would buy enough clean energy to power a quarter-million homes a year, but did not provide details.

Salazar's announcement was attended by environmental activists who support offshore wind and by business representatives interested either in bidding for leases or in making [turbine](#) parts and related facilities.

Among them was Prasad Karunakaran, CEO and founder of Nadicom, a new iron-casting company based in Fulton in Howard County that aims to build wind turbine components. The company is building its first factory in Iowa to supply the booming land-based wind energy industry there, he said, but is interested in setting up operations in Maryland as well.

"We know it's five years out," Karunakaran said, "but our eyes are open to the offshore market."

The area off Maryland's coast that would be open for leasing is less than half the size of what had originally been proposed. It was limited to avoid conflicts with ships entering and leaving Delaware Bay. Other areas may be excluded as more studies are done.

The draft environmental assessment issued last summer included an option for shrinking the state's offshore wind leasing area even more - by roughly 80 percent - to steer clear of other areas shippers may be concerned about. The final report passed over that option, without explanation.

But Dana E. Goward, director of maritime transportation systems at the U.S. Coast Guard, said the service is still studying potential shipping issues with wind turbines along the Atlantic coast and may yet recommend other areas be removed from leasing.

Bird lovers also reacted cautiously to Thursday's announcement.

Kurt R. Schwarz, conservation chair for the Maryland Ornithological Society, said his group has concerns about the potential for the 400-foot tall turbines to disrupt or harm migrating birds, particularly red knots, which stop off in Delaware Bay every spring on their annual flight from Brazil to Canada. Their numbers have fallen so much in recent years that they're under consideration for federal protection under the Endangered Species Act. Schwarz said the knots' migration flight path takes them through wind-turbine leasing areas off the Maryland and Delaware coasts.

Officials pointed out that those and other concerns would need to be addressed by wind developers before any turbines could be built, and

that the only structures being put up in the next year or two would be a handful of meteorological towers to monitor winds and weather conditions. Those towers would not pose a significant risk to birds, officials said.

But Schwarz said that lighting on the towers would need to be set up to avoid attracting birds, contending there have been documented cases of large kills associated with lights on similar individual structures on land.

Schwarz said the ornithological society does not oppose offshore wind, but urged officials to "proceed cautiously."

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