

U.S. clears path for offshore wind farms

February 13 2012, By Russell McLendon

Wind farms could soon be on the horizon for much of the U.S. Mid-Atlantic Coast, both figuratively and literally. The Interior Department has completed a study examining how offshore wind development would affect the region, announcing Feb. 3 that it threatens "no significant environmental and socioeconomic impacts."

That essentially clears the way for wind-farm lease sales off the coasts of Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey and Virginia, which the department says could begin by the end of this year in at least some of those states.

"Offshore wind holds incredible potential for our country, and we're moving full-steam ahead to accelerate the siting, leasing and construction of new projects," Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) said in a statement. On top of unveiling the [environmental assessment](#), the department also formally asked wind-power companies to specify which tracts they might want to lease.

Offshore wind has struggled to gain acceptance in the U.S., at least compared with Europe, where several countries began tapping ocean winds for energy years ago. The U.S. still doesn't have any [offshore wind farms](#), although it has made strides recently in changing that. Cape Wind - a 130-turbine, 420-megawatt wind farm in Massachusetts' Nantucket Sound - has already received [federal approval](#), and construction could begin this year.

Meanwhile, a smaller project in Rhode Island is racing Cape Wind to be first on the block: Deepwater Wind's 30-megawatt Block Island project

aims to begin construction in 2013 or 2014. Other companies, including Apex [Wind Energy](#) and Fisherman's Energy, are also jockeying for space on the Mid-Atlantic Coast.

Salazar made sure to frame the news under President Obama's "all of the above" [energy strategy](#), outlined during last month's State of the Union address. "When it comes to powering our nation's homes, businesses and economy, we need to take an all-of-the-above approach to safely and responsibly developing our domestic energy resources," Salazar said. Obama's plan involves 10 gigawatts of offshore wind generating capacity by 2020, and 54 gigawatts by 2030; the latter would be enough to power roughly 15 million U.S. homes, the Energy Department estimates.

"We are moving toward commercial-scale offshore wind energy leasing in the mid-Atlantic and adding the necessary tools to offer those leases," Bureau of Ocean Energy Management Director Tommy Beaudreau said Feb. 3. "We considered public input and conducted a thorough analysis to ensure future projects are sited in the right places, where the wind energy potential is significant and where environmental effects and conflicts with other uses can be minimized and managed." Since the new environmental study was broad, he added, BOEM will conduct further site- and project-specific analysis before issuing permits.

Describing the Mid-Atlantic as a "sweet spot" for tapping offshore winds, Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes called the latest announcement an early step in building "a world-class offshore wind industry." The American Wind [Energy](#) Association echoed that in a statement, calling the move "a significant milestone in efforts to launch a vital new American offshore wind industry."

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