

Feds pledge 'smart' permitting process for offshore wind projects

25 November 2010, By Timothy B. Wheeler

Obama administration officials announced Tuesday they are taking steps to speed development of wind energy projects along the Atlantic coast, and hope to be able to issue federal leases for putting huge power-generating turbines off Ocean City, Md., within the next year.

Speaking at a news conference at Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar unveiled a "Smart from the Start" initiative aimed at shortening the years-long federal approval process for offshore wind projects that now seem to be proceeding at a snail's pace.

Flanked by elected officials from Maryland and Delaware, Salazar said cutting through federal red tape on offshore wind leasing was essential to achieving the Obama administration's goal of spurring significant development of [renewable energy](#).

"The wind potential off the Atlantic coast is staggering," he said, adding that "if we are wise with our planning, we can help build a robust and environmentally responsible offshore renewable energy program that creates jobs here at home."

Under the initiative, federal regulators would work with Atlantic coast state officials over the next two months to identify offshore areas most suitable for wind turbines and with the fewest potential conflicts with shipping or the military. Wind developers would then be encouraged to apply for leases in those areas.

"We want to steer development to those areas we know are going to be successful," Salazar said.

Maryland's offshore wind prospects wouldn't be affected much by that pre-screening, since the state already has performed that analysis of the ocean off the state's 31-mile coast, and earlier this month the Interior Department invited wind developers to put in bids for leases.

But the initiative also would streamline the environmental and other reviews any proposed projects must undergo before being awarded a lease, potentially shaving six months to a year or more from the seven to nine years it now takes to get all the approvals needed to start construction. Once a project gets a federal lease, it would still have to undergo a full environmental impact study, officials stressed.

The Cape Wind project in Massachusetts' Nantucket Sound, the first in the nation to win federal approval, took eight years to clear all its regulatory hurdles, which Salazar said was "far too long." It remains to be seen whether it will be the first offshore turbines built, as the project has sparked controversy over its impact on landowners' vistas.

Besides the Massachusetts project, the federal government has issued four other leases - three off New Jersey, and one about 12 miles off Rehoboth Beach in Delaware. Salazar said he hoped the streamlined review process would enable his department to issue more leases late next year or early 2012.

"If we are wise with our planning, we can help build a robust and environmentally responsible offshore renewable energy program that creates jobs here at home," Salazar said.

The announcement was hailed by wind industry representatives and by Maryland and Delaware officials, who have been pressing for additional federal help getting offshore projects moving.

"This is the signal we've been looking for, and waiting for, for many years," said Jim Lanard, president of the Offshore Wind Development Coalition, a group of seven offshore wind developers, including NRG Bluewater Wind, the company that is proposing to build off Delaware's coast and has expressed similar interest in

Maryland waters. Lanard said regulatory delays and uncertainty had hindered developers' ability to attract investors willing to underwrite the projects.

But a Maryland environmentalist opposed to commercial wind projects warned that streamlining federal review of offshore turbines could wreak ecological havoc.

Norman Meadow, vice chairman of the Maryland Conservation Council, said he was worried that lining the Atlantic coast with turbines risked harm to endangered right whales, which might be struck by construction vessels, and to migratory birds, which might have trouble avoiding long strings of windmills. And placing the turbines on the ocean floor may also alter the habitat there in unforeseen ways, Meadow suggested.

"We know less about what lives in the ocean and on the bottom of the ocean than we know about what's on the surface of the moon," he said. It's problematic to shorten environmental reviews under those circumstances, Meadow argued, when biologists don't even know what they should be looking for in assessing the turbines' impacts.

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley hailed the announcement as an important step, but acknowledged that more work needs to be done to get these projects built and generating electricity.

Indeed, Maryland environmentalists are gearing up to press for state legislation that would require utilities to sign long-term contracts to buy power generated by offshore [wind turbines](#). Such a mandate would help ensure a market for projects that are struggling to gain financing, proponents say. O'Malley has yet to decide whether to support that legislation, according to an aide.

Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Jersey all have similar laws, and Delaware has adopted extra incentives for offshore power, said Lanard, the industry group executive. Massachusetts utility regulators this week authorized one of the state's main electricity providers to buy half the power generated by the Cape Wind project.

O'Malley also has joined with Delaware's Gov.

Jack Markell in urging the Obama administration to commit the federal government to buying a gigawatt of power from turbines off the mid-Atlantic coast. Federal officials have yet to respond. But O'Malley's own initiative to use the Maryland state government's buying power to promote renewable energy stumbled when the state's offer to sign a long-term contract to buy power from the Delaware offshore project was rejected by the developer.

"Bluewater wouldn't bite," O'Malley said. He said the deal fell apart because the wording of the state's offer wasn't "ironclad enough" to suit the developer, even though similarly worded commitments were acceptable to developers of land-based wind projects, such as Constellation Energy.

Noting that the announcement was made at Fort McHenry, scene of a two-day battle nearly 200 years ago, O'Malley said, "The battle for clean, green energy is going to take longer than a couple days. It's going to take relentless follow-up."

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