

Massachusetts coast eyed for possible wind farm

NEWBURYPORT, MASS.: Under the newly released ocean management plan for the state's coastal waters, Greater Newburyport's coastline could one day be home to 10 wind turbines.

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Massachusetts officials yesterday released a draft of the plan that spells out rules for setting up wind farms in state waters.

The plan gives the state's six regional planning authorities the option to build up to 10 wind turbines each, at least one-third of a mile from shore. They must be built within waters controlled by the state, which extend three miles off the coast. It also gives refusal rights to the community in whose waters a wind farm is proposed, but not neighboring communities.

Locally, the regional planning zone stretches from Salisbury to Rowley, an area that encompasses the waters off Salisbury Beach and most of Plum Island.

"Newburyport is part of the Merrimack Valley Planning (Commission) area," said Deerin Babb-Brott, Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Coastal Zone Management in the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. "Under the plan, regional planning can allocate 10 turbines where they see fit by working with individual companies or cities and towns."

The plan requires developers to prove that their projects will not affect fragile environmental systems, including fish nurseries and endangered whale feeding zones.

Gov. Deval Patrick has set a goal of generating 2,000 megawatts of wind power in Massachusetts by the year 2020 -- an effort that may require the installation of as many as 3,000 wind turbines across the state.

The Newburyport location has not been named as a Wind Energy Area in the report, but it is designated as a place turbines could go up should other entities want to do the research and submit it to the EEA for approval.

According to Babb-Brott, the plan -- the first of its kind in the nation -- means there is the possibility turbines can be brought into the region, though it will be up to cities and towns along the coast to make the final decision.

"Communities may want to ask who wants to do what," Babb-Brott said. "They may not want to do anything and wait for volunteers. The Secretary (Ian Bowles) thought the appropriate place for that level of decision making to be made was in the cities and towns."

At the same time regions have been allocated for the turbines, the plan must "identify and protect special, sensitive or unique estuarine and marine life," respect the importance of the commercial fishing industry to the commonwealth, and "preserve and enhance public access" to the ocean.

Babb-Brott said even if an area with a proposed turbine is the home to marine life, it does not mean development of a turbine will be prohibited.

"The plan allows for additional information," Babb-Brott said. "We may have identified something to be avoided, and then when a developer gets out there, they can come back to us and say that in doing studies, the area identified is really 50 feet away."

Babb-Brott said the intent of the plan is to provide a science-based context for good decision making and a better understanding of the social and environmental contexts in which development occurs.

Since August 2008, the ocean planning team held numerous public meetings on the process, including a statewide "listening tour" that traveled from the Cape and Islands to Pittsfield to receive input from interested parties.

The planning team says it has reviewed and synthesized all available scientific data related to Massachusetts' ocean ecology and has compiled a vast database of the various human uses of its coastal waters, including fishing, navigation, transportation, recreation and infrastructure. The result is a series of maps that detail existing uses of the ocean as well as areas where special marine species or habitats are located.

Based on this information, the planning team outlined appropriate areas for certain uses, like commercial-scale wind farms, and performance standards for other uses, like sand-mining, cables and pipelines, to ensure that there is minimal conflict between existing and proposed uses. The plan also includes a proposal for offshore community-based wind projects and identifies areas that are deserving of greater protection because of their high ecological value.

The height and power of the turbines will be decided down the line and will most likely take into consideration what communities need, Babb-Brott said.

"We tried to make this as flexible as possible because at the end of the day, there has to be formal support for it," Babb-Brott said. "It is entirely up to cities and towns to opt in. We are not doing this to impose anything -- just to allow the initiative to go forward."