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California tests waters of offshore wind strategy

An illustration of floating offshore wind turbines is shown.
Josh Bauer/National Renewable Energy Laboratory

A new blueprint explores how the state might approach environmental reviews to ensure that offshore wind proposals move swiftly through permitting.

By **HEATHER RICHARDS**

ENERGYWIRE | California's strategy to power 25 million homes with offshore wind may mimic an Obama-era plan that helped bring large-scale solar energy to public lands in the Golden State's deserts. Mirroring that federal solar strategy is one of several ideas spelled out in the California Energy Commission's new permitting road map for offshore wind.

Mandated by California's clean energy law, the blueprint released last week explores how the state might approach environmental reviews — as well as tribal consultation and coordination with the federal government — to ensure that future proposals for massive offshore wind farms move swiftly through permitting. The plan comes as lawmakers in Sacramento are also considering a more direct role in getting offshore wind power built in the Pacific Ocean.

California's goal of reaching 25 gigawatts of offshore wind by 2045 is the single biggest state target for the technology in the country. The Biden administration is aiming to reach 110 GW of offshore wind nationally by 2050 as part of a larger platform to make the country less reliant on fossil fuels.

To help California reach its target, the state ordered the energy commission to ink a comprehensive offshore wind strategy to make sure the permitting process is ready when wind developers begin to advance projects. The road map released last week is a step toward finalizing that larger strategy.

"The Energy Commission is proud to deliver this permitting roadmap detailing the critical role each level of government plays in achieving California's offshore wind goals," David Hochschild, chair of the commission, said in a statement.

The central takeaway from the report is that offshore wind will demand tremendous coordination, leveraging expertise at different state agencies while also keeping state processes in lockstep with federal timelines. California's offshore wind industry, if it develops, will primarily be in federal waters to be farther from shore, where they are less visible.

By the report's estimate, an offshore wind developer faces six to 10 years before it gets federal approval to build a wind array. State approvals take roughly four to six years, while local permitting takes two to three years.

To make those timelines align, the commission said it may be possible to have a joint federal-state environmental assessment process because federal requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act are similar to reviews required by the California Environmental Quality Act.

Commission staff said offshore wind is not the first industry state policymakers have tried to plan for on a large scale. In 2008, during the Obama administration, state and federal officials worked together on a plan for large solar energy on public lands in the state's desert.

Adam Stern, executive director of the industry group Offshore Wind California, said the road map was "good news" for raising turbines in the Pacific. "We're continuing to review the details of the report," he said in an interview. "But they're all positive elements and recommendations."

Industry has been pushing California lawmakers to provide certainty to the offshore wind permitting process — as well as asking lawmakers for potential direct commitments to secure offshore wind for the California grid to bolster investment in the highly expensive and long-term projects.

California's offshore wind ambition will be pivotal in developing floating offshore wind in the United States, a technology necessary to raising wind farms in deep waters like the Pacific and the Gulf of Maine — where traditional turbines can't reach the seafloor.

There are no such commercial projects in the U.S., and the technology is at the early stages of deployment at commercial scale in northern Europe. Because it is an emerging technology, floating wind is still highly expensive.

More direct role?

One thing California's road map doesn't address for the offshore wind industry is whether the state should take a more direct role in getting the technology onto the grid.

That issue has been percolating through the industry in California since last year when Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) upped the offshore wind target to 25 GW — and the White House sold its first-ever offshore wind leases off the California coast.

It could come to a head in coming months because of several legislative proposals in Sacramento.

Newsom has put forward a bill that would give the state's Department of Water Resources a new role in procuring clean power to meet goals set by the state's electricity regulators. That may help ensure that California moves toward carbon neutrality — meaning the state aims to be removing just as much carbon pollution in the state as it creates — by 2045, something many analysts say would require offshore wind in large amounts.

State Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia (D) has proposed a similar bill in the Legislature.

Stern said both measures have "encouraged" the industry, which sees direct state commitments to buy offshore wind power as one potential way to help achieve economies of scale.

Mark Specht, a senior energy analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said California may benefit from a so-called procurement strategy of some kind. States like New Jersey, Massachusetts and New York — leaders in advancing offshore wind — hold regular competitions for proposed offshore wind projects to win state contracts.

While the Union of Concerned Scientists doesn't have a position on the current California measures, Specht said some degree of state-led procurement for offshore wind power could help bridge the gap between offshore wind goals in California and the reality of wind projects getting built.

"All of our analysis and our plans say that we need a lot of offshore wind, and we're still trying to sort out how to get it on the grid," he said.