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Offshore Wind Developers Urge California To ‘Triple Down’ On Project Pace

By Curt Barry

Offshore wind power developers are urging California officials to “triple down” on speeding the pace of multiple activities to advance first-time projects off the Golden State’s coastline, including permitting, port upgrades, utility procurement agreements, new transmission, and additional siting areas.

“In order to build on this momentum -- and 2022 was an extraordinary year of achievement from the perspective of our industry and our member companies -- we need to double down, I’d say even triple down, on the pace of progress on about six separate workstreams,” said Adam Stern, executive director of the industry organization Offshore Wind California, during a Jan. 23 webinar hosted by California Natural Resources Agency Secretary Wade Crowfoot.

The group represents numerous companies involved in different aspects of offshore wind energy development, including the five firms that recently [won bids for federal leases](#) to develop projects in areas located off northern and central California, covering roughly 373,000 acres with a potential power capacity of 4.6 gigawatts (GW). The leases totaled \$757 million.

Stern’s push to speed various state and federal planning and approval processes to build the projects further underscores experts’ concerns that such activities [could take five or more years](#) and lower expectations about when and to what degree offshore wind can help the state achieve its greenhouse gas-reduction, renewable-power and grid-reliability goals.

Stern maintained it is possible that wind turbines could be operating off the California coast by 2030.

“But in the buildup to that, in order to get there, there has to be a tremendous amount of investment in infrastructure -- to build the assembly, to manufacture the blades and the cables,” he continued. “And all of this needs to be developed in what we might refer to as a giant Gantt chart that has to be ready to go, so that when the projects are approved, when the other aspects of planning are conducted in areas like procurement and transmission -- yes, we have the projects ready in the water.”

Further, “our industry couldn’t be more excited to be part of this process, but it needs to be accelerated at all levels of state and federal government if it’s going to be for real,” he added.

Regarding permitting, Stern said officials “need to navigate the complexity” of California Environmental Quality Act and National Environmental Policy Act rules, while developing a “roadmap that brings efficiencies, while at the same time protecting marine and coastal resources.”

Regarding ports, Stern said “we need a multi-port strategy to manufacture and assemble these offshore wind turbines and towers. And that will mean infrastructure investments, both on the North Coast and on the Central Coast.”

In terms of the state’s process for facilitating contracts for utilities to purchase the wind energy -- also known as procurement -- “the companies that are prepared to invest literally billions of dollars to build the projects need a way to sell the power,” he said, noting that the California Public Utilities Commission is “beginning deliberations on how best to do that.”

Procurement Process

State Sen. John Laird (D-Santa Cruz) said during the event that lawmakers may have to address that issue to ensure key elements are addressed in state law. “The thing I’m hearing most from the industry right now, and some of the successful bidders -- either directly or through other people -- is that procurement is going to be one of the biggest issues that’s going to allow this to go ahead and give it stability,” he said. “And we have to figure out a way -- if it’s not in statute or not in process already -- to make sure that those concerns are met. That they have the kind of confidence -- whether it’s with investors or actually developing it or whatever -- that they can move ahead.”

Transmitting the electricity from the turbines to various inland points will also be a challenge for state officials, experts have noted. The California Independent System Operator, which manages the state’s grid, “is now starting to do transmission planning to factor in the needs for offshore wind,” Stern said. “Fortunately, there are some resources available on the Central Coast that will need to be built out,” but on the North Coast “we have a lot of work to do there, to bring the power to shore and feed it into the grid.”

One energy consultant, in the “Q&A” feature of the webinar, questioned some of the assumptions being made about transmission by state and industry leaders, asserting that it takes at least 10 years for new transmission lines to be proposed, approved and constructed. That implies it wouldn’t be until after 2030 that any offshore wind power could be delivered to many areas.

Workforce and supply-chain development will be another major component of facilitating the success of wind power, according to Stern, who called it a “critical aspect” of the effort. “There’s the potential here to develop tens of thousands of jobs, if we do this right. Not only for the needs in California, but we can become a global hub for the world.”

California should also “move quickly to develop siting plans for the next set of” development areas to substantially increase the potential capacity for offshore wind, he added, noting that some areas have preliminarily been identified off the coasts of Mendocino and Del Norte counties. He is hoping federal officials will hold a second lease auction within the next two years.

Crowfoot and other state leaders also emphasized during the call how the various planning and permitting processes must include participation and input from a variety of affected stakeholders, including the fishing industry, Native American tribes, and environmental groups. While the fishing industry was not represented during the webinar, representatives of the other groups did participate.

Laird said the entire process must address stakeholder concerns “so everybody feels like they were at the table and that a fair shake was given to the concerns that they expressed.” -- Curt Barry (cbarry@iwpnews.com)