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Biden Opens California's Coast to Wind Farms

The idea of erecting wind farms in the Pacific Ocean has long been dismissed as impractical. But major hurdles, including military objections, have now been cleared.

The Block Island wind farm, the first commercial offshore wind farm in the United States, off the coast of Rhode Island in 2016.

By **Coral Davenport**



Credit: Kayana Szymczak for The New York Times

WASHINGTON — The notion of wind farms churning in the Pacific Ocean, creating clean energy to power homes and businesses, has long been dismissed because of logistical challenges posed by a deep ocean floor and opposition from the military, which prefers no obstacles for its Navy ships.

But evolving technology and a president determined to rapidly expand wind energy have dramatically shifted the prospects for wind farms in the Pacific. On Tuesday, the Navy abandoned its opposition and joined the Interior Department to give its blessing to two areas off the California coast that the government said can be developed for wind turbines.

The plan allows commercial offshore wind farms in a 399-square-mile area in Morro Bay along central California, and another area off the coast of Humboldt in Northern California.

It marked the most significant action the federal government has taken to promote wind energy along the West Coast and is part of [President Biden's](#) aggressive plan to expand renewable energy and shift the nation away from fossil fuels. "This is a breakthrough that will allow the siting of offshore wind in the Pacific Ocean," said Gina McCarthy, the White House climate adviser.

And it is a milestone for California, which has committed to renewable energy and has been experiencing the effects of climate change like few other states. Last summer, wildfires raged and the highest temperature ever recorded was logged at 130 degrees Fahrenheit in Death Valley. Sea levels are rising, coasts are eroding and drought is intensifying.

Gavin Newsom, the Democratic governor of California, called the move "historic."

"Developing offshore wind to produce clean, renewable energy could be a game changer to achieving California's clean energy goals and addressing climate change — all while bolstering the economy and creating new jobs," said Mr. Newsom, who had tussled regularly with the Trump administration over California's attempts to cut fossil fuel pollution but has found an ally in President Biden.

The announcement came weeks after the Biden administration approved [the nation's first ever commercial-scale offshore wind farm](#), to be built off the coast of Massachusetts. About a dozen other offshore wind projects along the East Coast are now under federal review.

Gina McCarthy, the national climate advisor, last month. "This is a breakthrough that will allow the siting of offshore wind in the Pacific Ocean," she said Tuesday.

Credit: Al Drago for The New York Times



The administration estimates that wind turbines in Morro Bay and near Humboldt could together eventually generate enough electricity to power 1.6 million homes. If those numbers are realized, it could make the California coast one of the largest generators of wind power in the world. The new coastal Massachusetts wind farm is expected to have up to 84 giant wind turbines. By comparison, Mr. Newsom estimated that the California sites could hold more than 300 turbines.

Administration officials declined to say when the areas might be leased to companies. Asked to offer a timeline, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said, "This is a priority for us and we're excited about it."

While the offshore wind industry has boomed around the world, particularly near the coasts of Norway and the United Kingdom, it has flourished where the water is shallow and turbines can be anchored to the ocean floor. By contrast, the Pacific Ocean floor drops steeply from the coastline, making the water too deep to anchor wind towers. As a result, some companies have built floating turbines. There are currently about 20 such small floating turbine farms around the world, and none at the scale envisioned by Mr. Newsom. But the California governor said that he has already heard from potential developers. "We've had not just international companies but governments reach out to us," he said. "We expect an enormous amount of interest."

ENBW, a German electric utility that owns and operates four wind farms off the coast of Germany, intends to bid on leases to build a floating wind farm in Morro Bay, said the company's spokesman, Damian Bednarz. The project, called Castle Wind, would consist of dozens of floating turbines, enough to power hundreds of thousands of homes, he said. While it would be the first time ENBW has produced floating turbines, the company has been working with the federal government and the state of California for the past five years in hopes of clearing the way for the Castle Wind project, Mr. Bednarz said. "We are starting this industry from scratch on the West Coast," he said. "We have gotten a lot of positive input from players in Washington and Sacramento that there is a real interest in doing this. But groups representing the fishing industry are outraged, saying that the administration has sped forward with a plan that is larger and more potentially disruptive to marine life than they had anticipated.

"We're totally against this," said Tom Hafer, president of the Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization. "We've been consulting with the Castle Wind people for a long time, and we helped pick the spot and developed a memorandum of understanding on an area that we thought would be sustainable for us. That was about 120 square miles. This is 399 square miles. We're going to lose a whole bunch of fishing grounds. There will be cables in the water. We don't know how the whales will react. There are a lot of unknowns. People don't realize how massive this project will be."

The moves come as Mr. Biden has pledged to cut the nation's fossil fuel emissions 50 percent from 2005 levels by 2030 by pushing policies designed to promote the use of electric vehicles and clean energy such as wind and solar power. In particular, the administration has pledged to build 30,000 megawatts of offshore wind in the United States by 2030. While the Obama administration hoped to bring offshore wind farms to California, it was never able to sell leases to commercial companies to build turbines there.

In 2018, the Trump administration [took the first steps](#) to enable companies to lease waters in Central and Northern California for wind projects, when the Interior Department identified three areas for leases, including the Morro Bay and Humboldt county waters. But after Pentagon officials [objected, the plan was adrift](#).

Mr. Biden has sought to unite his Cabinet in finding ways to promote renewable energy and cut carbon dioxide pollution under what he has called an "all-of-government" approach to tackling climate. Speaking on a White House call with reporters, Colin Kahl, the Pentagon's under secretary of policy, said, "Tackling the climate crisis is a national security imperative," adding that the Defense Department "is committed to working across the U.S. government to find solutions that support renewable energy in a manner compatible with essential military operations."

Offshore wind developers said that the coordinated federal government approach toward approving the wind farms, pushed directly by the president along with his top cabinet secretaries and the California governor, appears to have made a difference in the fate of wind farms in the Pacific.

During the Trump administration, career-level civil servants at the Interior Department did approve plans to open up portions of the California coast to wind farms, according to two people familiar with the matter. But the Navy was opposed and Mr. Trump, who famously ridiculed wind power and said turbines kill bald eagles, never championed the project.

"Now there is a strong commitment at the top to making this happen. That's the big breakthrough here," said Dan Reicher, who served as assistant secretary at the Department of Energy in the Clinton administration and now is an adviser to Magellan Wind, which develops projects with offshore floating turbines. When Magellan first sought to build floating wind farms in 2012, "there was huge skepticism," Mr. Reicher said. But in the past decade, the technology has advanced enough that more companies are investing in it, he said. Still, he said that he doesn't know whether the company that he advises will seek to purchase leases to build floating wind farms off California.