



California Data – Implications for Planning and Permitting

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A substantial effort has been underway in California for the past few years to collect and compile data in the offshore and marine habitats along the California coast. The California Energy Commission, Ocean Protection Council, Bureau of Energy Management (BOEM), Department of Energy, and Schatz Energy Research Center, among others, have collected a great deal of data related to environmental and human resources (e.g., marine habitat, fishing uses, wind resources, and vessel transit density). Most of the data are publicly available at the [California Offshore Wind Energy Gateway](#). The amount of upfront research that has been completed or is underway off the shores of California is substantial, and the fact that these data are publicly available is significant. This is particularly striking when compared with the amount of data available during BOEM's early coordination with states and stakeholders for wind energy area identification on the Atlantic Outer Continental Shelf and for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process that was conducted during the establishment of lease areas that were subsequently issued for auction.

The West Coast of the United States (West Coast) has some of the largest, most extensive long-term databases (with >1 million detections, 200+ contributors, and 45+ years of data) available on marine mammal occurrence, distribution, and abundance anywhere in the world, particularly in and near the three BOEM Call Areas currently being assessed for potential offshore wind development in central and northern California. Data are contributed by hundreds of sources, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/National Marine Fisheries Service, BOEM, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Navy, universities, research institutions, and citizen scientists (e.g., whale watches). These databases are always being updated since some of the surveys are ongoing and some data are still being processed and have not yet been uploaded online. Such data are critical to provide baseline information to evaluate and estimate impacts of human-related activities, including renewable energy development, on protected marine species, as required under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and environmental mandates (e.g., NEPA).

BOEM could take advantage of this advanced data collection in its forthcoming Environmental Assessment(s) (EA[s]) for lease areas off the shores of California as well as for other lease areas on the West Coast. Including these data in the lease area EA(s) and/or technical studies will help streamline the process for project-specific NEPA analyses prepared by BOEM as well as for successful lessee developer-prepared Construction and Operation Plans. Studies and reports can be incorporated by reference in the subsequent documents, and project specific NEPA analyses can tier to BOEM's NEPA document(s) for lease issuance if a robust assessment of available data is included. An additional benefit of this approach is that it provides the public with a better understanding of the existing conditions in lease areas, which helps reduce speculation and uncertainty related to the potential impacts that may result from development of a commercial-scale wind farm. Given the new NEPA regulations accelerating project timelines (one year for EAs and two years for Environmental Impact Statements), having this information readily available will provide much-needed efficiencies. In light of the upcoming change in the federal administration, there is some uncertainty related to the future of these regulations. Regardless, most developers opt to participate in the One Federal Decision process, which requires all agencies to complete their permitting in two years. The availability of existing information may reduce the need for expensive time- and labor-intensive project-specific technical studies.

BOEM is in good position to conduct the NEPA process to establish lease areas off the shores of California and move forward with lease sales so that offshore wind can contribute to California's ambitious greenhouse gas reduction goals and grid stability obligations. Preparing a document that includes the breadth of data and depth of research that have been undertaken along the West Coast will position the offshore wind industry and agencies to be in an excellent place to kick off the environmental planning process.