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Why the wind carries promise of a new economic boom for Humboldt County

Michael Kellogg stands on the end of a rail car at the Timber Heritage Association in Samoa on Tuesday, Oct. 19, 2021. The proposed Humboldt Bay Offshore Wind and Heavy Lift Marine Terminal would border the association's property.
(Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat)



By **ANDREW GRAHAM**

SAMOA — A rising wind banged Ed Weatherbee's wooden gate over and over as an approaching storm darkened the sky the morning of Oct. 21. Like the colorful but worn homes of Samoa, Weatherbee has weathered more than just storms. This narrow strip of land, which protects Humboldt and Arcata bays from the north Pacific Ocean, has also been buffeted by the winds of commerce and politics that once drove Humboldt County's boom and bust timber industry.

"I hate the wind," Weatherbee said. "I've spent all my life in it." Yet it is the wind, which on this day was busy knocking the tops off heaving waves visible just uphill from Weatherbee's home, that carries the promise of a new boom for Humboldt County. Out on the open ocean, the wind is strong and steady, with average speeds reaching more than 20 mph.

As California's leaders and President Joe Biden's administration push for a dramatic increase in renewable energy to slow the ravages of global warming, eyes have turned to this particular windswept stretch of sea. "The resource is astounding," said Arne Jacobson, director of Humboldt State University's Schatz Energy Research Center. "It's one of the best in the world."

This summer, the federal government designated a 206-square mile stretch of open water as the Humboldt Wind Energy Area. On Oct. 13, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland announced the government's intent to begin leasing the area, which begins 21 miles out from Humboldt Bay, to energy companies in the fall of 2022. As soon as 2026, Humboldt Bay could see towering wind turbines perched atop floating platforms being towed seaward out of the bay.

A view of Eureka from Tuluwat Island across Humboldt Bay on Tues., Oct. 19, 2021.
(Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat)

And building those turbines, local leaders hope, will transform the shoreline from Samoa to Eureka, the county seat just across the bay, which is home to 27,000 people. The prospect is driving optimism in a region that has been largely isolated behind a "redwood curtain" from the rest of California's powerhouse economy, especially as the timber industry has declined. But not everyone is gung-ho for offshore wind. For the rough coast's hardened fishermen, the idea carries as much skepticism and fear as it does hope.



At best, they say, the impact of offshore wind energy on their industry can be mitigated with regulations, cooperation and financial compensation. At worst, they worry, large scale offshore development could push an already difficult way of life toward decline through competition for space both on the open ocean and in port. "The impacts to fishermen are sort of like the black sheep of the wind project," Humboldt Bay fisherman Harrison Ibach said.

Local industry isn't the only hurdle. California's offshore wind energy dreams must also overcome significant and varied costs, as well as political and engineering challenges. The federal government must complete environmental studies and a bidding process. There are massive engineering challenges for electrical transmission to overcome. And hundreds of billions of dollars for revamping the electrical grid and building more renewable energy are tied up in the general political turbulence of Washington, D.C.

Closer to home, local politics, tribal governments, neighbors to planned infrastructure, state environmental laws and big port investments all must be addressed. There's a long way to go, but suddenly Humboldt Bay, with a deepwater port and no bridge to block the passage of turbines that are taller than the Golden Gate Bridge, once again has what the world seems to be looking for.

Even those who'd rather see California get its clean energy elsewhere agree that the winds of change blowing toward the Humboldt Bay appear as potent as the winds offshore. "This train is leaving the station, and it's got fuel." Ibach said.