

May 11, 2023

California floating wind build 'could repeat joined-up thinking that spurred massive solar'

California solar farm. Photo: Camille Seaman/Solutions Project/Flickr



Lead state energy body sees inter-agency 'team' approach best for leveraging existing resources and expertise in streamlining and strengthening project reviews

By **Tim Ferry**

California could repeat for floating wind the highly-coordinated “team approach” that helped it deploy huge amounts of solar capacity from the first decade of the millennium, says a new 'roadmap' for wind at sea.

The California Energy Commission (CEC), the state body charged with setting energy policy, said a coordinated, inter-agency effort helped lay the groundwork for consenting of 38GW of solar-thermal and PV, and could help achieve the same outcome despite the big challenges facing offshore wind.

The CEC this week released its permitting reform roadmap aimed at streamlining floating wind project development in the race to meet its nation-leading goals of 2-5GW by 2030 and 25GW by 2045.

It unveiled the report, [Assembly Bill 525 Offshore Wind Energy Permitting Roadmap](#), developed as required by AB525, the state law signed by governor Gavin Newsom in 2021 authorising offshore wind development.

“This is an important milestone on our journey to deploy 25GW by midcentury in a way that’s environmentally responsible and provides benefits to all residents, especially in rural coastal communities where the projects will be built,” said CEC chair David Hochschild.

The permitting roadmap “describes timeframes and milestones for a coordinated, comprehensive, and efficient permitting process for offshore wind energy facilities and associated electricity and transmission infrastructure off the coast of California,” according to AB525’s text.

Complicated and redundant permitting processes across multiple state and federal agencies result in average project timelines of eight to 10 years, according to BloombergNEF, and streamlining the various actions is a priority at all levels of US government.

The administration of President Joe Biden Wednesday also released its goals for strategic permitting reforms that would enable the development of “clean energy projects in the US at the speed and scale needed to adequately address the climate crisis,” according to a statement by the White House.

The Biden administration highlighted the need for close coordination with state and local agencies on permitting and environmental review.

Permitting is just one hurdle that California will face in developing giga-scale floating wind, and AB525 requires CEC to coordinate with specified state and local agencies on other bottlenecks, including lack of transmission, port, and supply chain capacity in developing “a five-part strategic plan for offshore wind development”.

The plan must be submitted to the California Natural Resources Agency and the state legislature by 30 June 2023.

CEC’s roadmap considers multiple pathways that would result in “faster and more predictable project permitting”, falling into either ‘coordinated’ or ‘consolidated’ approaches.

Several options for a coordinated approach reference precedents in large scale solar development in the state’s deserts and infrastructure projects in the San Francisco Bay. These approaches would either involve forming a team from the various relevant state agencies to oversee the floating wind rollout, or identifying a lead agency through which other bodies would operate.

“One option is to develop a coordinated team approach between the federal and state agencies that work on permitting patterned after the Renewable Energy Action Team (REAT) employed by California for permitting large solar thermal and photovoltaic projects in the California desert,” says the roadmap.

“Starting in 2008, California and the federal government coordinated the permitting of large-scale solar projects in the California desert to meet the requirements of federal loan guarantees and tax incentives under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).”

A consolidated pathway, by contrast, would require the establishment of “a single permitting agency with the authority to permit offshore wind-related components located within state-jurisdictional waters”, the report said.

CEC concluded that “a coordinated approach would leverage existing expertise and staff resources housed in each state agency while allowing for permitting process improvements and streamlining,” the report said. It emphasised, however, the need to evaluate “additional options and suggestions fully before deciding the best permitting pathway”.