

RECHARGE

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California floating wind power edges toward launch pad with call to deepwater developers



View of the sunset as the USS Lewis B Puller frigate glides on the water in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of California Photo: William Nation/Getty Images

US government opens door to 'expressions of interest' in projects that could add 3GW of offshore energy capacity in Pacific waters

By **Richard Kessler**

The US government has opened the door to global offshore wind developers to submit expressions of interest for commercial leases in two new deepwater areas off the coast of central California, moving the country a step closer to launching construction of as much as 3GW of floating projects.

The two zones, identified as Morro Bay Call Area East and West Extensions, are spread over 364km² (90,025 acres) within a larger tract called Morro Bay 399 Area in federal waters in the Pacific Ocean.

In May, the White House and state agreed to reconfigure the original Morro Bay zone proposed in 2018 because of national defence considerations – the US Navy tests weapons and holds training exercises along parts of California's Pacific coast – and set a target for an initial round of lease auctions there as early as 2022.

Tomorrow (Thursday 29 July), the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the federal industry regulatory body, will publish the call for information and nominations in the Federal Register, the official record of the US government. That will initiate a 45-day period for developers to submit expression of interest for either area, or both, while also giving the public until 13 September to comment on potential development there.

BOEM, which did not provide nameplate capacity for the Morro Bay Call Area East and West Extensions, said the extension areas will be included in its environmental review of the Morro Bay 399 Area as stipulated by the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act.

Separately, BOEM said it is also moving forward with an environmental assessment of a 1.6GW capacity zone called Humboldt off the state's remote and thinly populated far northern coast, where an international consortium including Principle Power, EDPR and Aker Offshore Wind aim to build an up-to-150MW array.

In both cases, the agency will consider potential environmental consequences of site characterisation activities such as surveys and core samples, and project easements associated with each potential lease issued.

"If approved for offshore wind energy development, these areas could bring us closer to reaching this administration's goal of deploying 30GW of offshore wind by 2030," said BOEM director Amanda Lefton, referring to the national target set by President Joe Biden set in March.

At least 14 developers are prospecting in California's floating wind market: Algonquin Power and Utilities, Avangrid Renewables, Castle Wind (EnBW and Trident Winds), Cierco, Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, EDF Renewables, EDP Renewables, Equinor, Mainstream Renewable Power, Northland Power, Redwood Coast Energy Authority, RWE Renewables and Wpd.

Most interest is focused on the central coast given availability of heavy-duty shoreline grid infrastructure and relative proximity of population centres. Wind speeds, however, are not as consistent or strong as those in northern California that exceed 10 metres/second on a mean annual basis at a height of 100 metres – the best in the US.

According to a scenario scoping report by analysts Aegir Insights, floating wind power could steam forward to account for as much as 25% of the total offshore plant capacity installed off US shores by 2035 fuelled by a massive build-out in Pacific waters.

Floating projects could become an increasingly important element of the US' wider offshore wind plans as analysts forecast the country could fall well short of the Biden administration's 30GW goal – until now concentrated off the Atlantic seaboard, due to a combination of a slow and complex permitting process, underdeveloped supply chain and lack of Jones Act-fit installation vessels.