

# RECHARGE

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## California raises sails as Morro Bay floating wind plans progress in US Pacific

Morro Bay WEA. Fishing boats docked in Morro Bay, California.  
Photo: Alliance for Communities for Sustainable Fisheries



*Simultaneous proposal for nearby marine sanctuary boosts environmental protection, but fisheries object*

By **Tim Ferry**

The US government has upgraded waters around Morro Bay on California's central coast to a wind energy area (WEA) designation, setting the stage for up to 3 GW of lease sales beginning next autumn and moving ahead long-anticipated plans to develop offshore wind power in the Pacific waters. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), under the Department of Interior tasked with managing development in America's federal waters, including offshore wind, released the news in a statement 12 November "as part of the Biden-Harris administration's efforts to advance clean energy development".

The promotion to WEA from a Call Area – in which BOEM tests the waters for commercial interest – indicates that the 240,898-acre (376 square miles) Morro Bay WEA offers strong potential, with good wind energy resources and few apparent environmental and user conflicts. The upgrade triggered an environmental assessment (EA) that will look at potential impacts from site characterisation and research within the WEA and includes a 60-day comment period with two virtual hearings.

Morro Bay is California's second WEA after the Humboldt call in the state's far northern sea was upgraded to a WEA last summer and continues the industry's momentum after Governor **Gavin Newsom signed AB525 into law** in September requiring the state to progress towards 4 GW of offshore wind by 2030 and 10 GW by 2045.

"Offshore wind presents a significant opportunity for California and our nation as we transition to clean, renewable energy. Today's announcement represents significant progress towards that future," said BOEM director Amanda Lefton, in a statement. "As the process continues, BOEM is committed to environmental reviews, which are critical for a strong resource management programme, and to robust public engagement."



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California has some of the country's richest offshore wind resources, with as much as 112 GW of potential, but its narrow continental shelf means development zones are in waters too deep for conventional bottom-fixed technology, necessitating floating units. The designation gained wide support from a diverse coalition of business, environment, and labour organisations, particularly as California has grappled with a series of heatwaves, droughts and wildfires that were attributed to the impact of climate change.

"This is a very big step that shows the Biden Administration and BOEM are on track for lease auctions in the fall of 2022. The Morro Bay WEA will be able to generate up to 3 GW of clean, renewable power for California ratepayers," Adam Stern, executive director of Offshore Wind California, a trade group of offshore wind developers and technology firms, told *Recharge*. "Combined with 1.6 GW in the Humboldt WEA, this is an excellent start towards a floor in California of 10 GW of installed offshore wind capacity by 2040."

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California's central coast places a premium on both clean energy and jobs, as its lone nuclear power plant, the 2.2 GW Diablo Canyon Power Plant is set to close by 2025. The power plant alone generates over 8% of the states total, a significant sum in a state notorious for rising peak demand and consequent energy shortages. It is also the largest private sector employee on California's central coast and its imminent closure will impact the local economy.



Reach, a nonprofit aimed at “increasing economic prosperity on the central coast of California” commissioned a study by the California Polytechnic Institute and found that “the development of a 3 GW wind farm would equate to \$262 m in annual economic impact and 650 good paying, long-term jobs”, it noted in a statement. “For the labour community, [offshore wind] means long-term, good paying jobs along California’s coastal regions,” Jeff Hunerlach, district representative for Operating Engineers union local 3, told *Recharge*.

BOEM’s 12 November announcement of the Morro Bay WEA followed on the heels of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric (NOAA)’s announcement of a proposed adjacent 7,000 square mile national marine sanctuary. “The designation of a Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary would protect the region’s important marine ecosystem, maritime heritage resources and cultural values of Indigenous communities, while allowing NOAA to manage compatible uses within its boundaries,” NOAA said in a statement. NOAA falls under the US Department of Commerce.

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The Northern Chumash Tribal Council has urged the creation of the national marine sanctuary in Morro Bay for years, saying it is vital to protect the area from oil and gas exploration. “With a Marine Sanctuary, we can put a big ‘no oil’ padlock on our sanctuary,” it said in a statement.



“On California’s Central Coast, we have a chance to both harness the wind energy potential of our ocean and better protect the area’s extraordinary natural and cultural heritage,” said Gina McCarthy, National Climate Advisor, in a statement. “To tackle the climate crisis we must – and we will – move ahead simultaneously with conservation and smartly-sited clean energy production.”

For the fishing industry, however, the two announcements seem like a one-two punch. Commercial fishing is permitted within most national marine sanctuaries, but local fishing industry representatives said that the establishment of the sanctuary as well as the WEA – and the potential for the nearby Diablo Canyon Call Area to be likewise advanced – raises costs and risk that make the industry increasingly untenable. “There’s no young people coming into the industry, no new blood, everyone is so worried about with is going on with the industry,” Tom Hafer, president of the Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen’s Organisation, told *Recharge*.

Steve Scheiblauber, a consultant working with the fisheries advocacy Alliance for Communities for Sustainable Fisheries, said that “most fishermen understand the need to get off fossil fuels”, but are concerned that BOEM is minimising their potential losses and is not stressing their involvement in the industry’s development. The proposed marine sanctuary is also highly controversial and Scheiblauber said that most fishers believe it will do little to advance biodiversity preservation. “The fishing industry will reluctantly accept offshore wind,” he told *Recharge*. But the marine sanctuary “will be vigorously opposed”.

California’s offshore wind sector is also struggling with a proposed project in state waters. In a 3-0 vote, the California State Lands Commission approved a final preliminary environmental impact report, an early document to meant to assist with the upcoming formal California Environmental Quality Act process, for two proposed floating wind projects of between 40-60 MW by French BW Ideol and local Cierco Project Corporation in state waters off the coast of Vandenberg Air Force base, about 60 miles south of Morro Bay.

As the projects are sited much closer to shore than those in the Morro Bay WEA and will have more impact on the coastal environment and communities, they have united tribal groups, environmentalists, and fishing associations in opposition.

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Still, the offshore wind sector remains confident that the multiple ocean users can all be accommodated. “We are confident that the offshore wind industry can coexist with other ocean users, including commercial fishermen and the proposed Chumash National Marine Sanctuary,” Offshore Wind California’s Stern told *Recharge*.

Deployment of 10 GW of offshore wind by 2045 – only a small portion of the region’s huge potential – could bring \$1 bn of annual cost savings to the California electricity system, increase the state’s energy security and independence and deliver high levels of reliable power directly to major load centres on the coast, [a recent study from the USC Schwarzenegger Institute](#) claimed.