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Five new offshore wind farms coming to the California coast

Offshore wind turbines pictured near Block Island, R.I. California offshore wind energy leases were auctioned off by the federal government Wednesday, adding up to \$757.1 million for five areas off the coasts of Morro Bay and Humboldt Bay capable of producing over 4.6 gigawatts of power.

Michael Dwyer, STF / Associated Press



by Tara Duggan

Five companies won California offshore wind energy leases in an auction that closed Wednesday, offering a total of \$757.1 million for five areas off the coasts of Morro Bay and Humboldt Bay capable of producing over 4.6 gigawatts of power.

The sales from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management were the first for California and the first for the United States involving floating offshore wind turbines. Offshore wind has become a priority for the Biden administration — whose goal is to deliver 30 gigawatts of offshore wind energy capacity by 2030 — and Gov. Gavin Newsom, who said it will help the state move toward its goal of transitioning to 90% clean energy by 2035.

“Offshore wind is a critical component to achieving our world-leading clean energy goals and this sale is an historic step on California’s march toward a future free of fossil fuels,” Newsom said in a statement. “Together with leadership from the Biden-Harris Administration, we’re entering a new era of climate action and solutions that give our planet a new lease on life.”

The highest bidder in the auction was California North Floating LLC, which offered \$173.8 million for 69,000 acres off the coast of Humboldt Bay. Other bids ranged between \$130 and \$157.7 million for the five leases, which together add up to over 130,000 acres off the coast of Humboldt and over 240,000 acres off Morro Bay. Potentially capable of powering 1.5 million homes, the wind farms are about 20 miles from shore and unlikely to be visible from the coast except on very clear days.

“Today’s final auction results are great news for California’s offshore wind industry, workers and electricity ratepayers,” said Adam Stern, executive director of Offshore Wind California in a statement. The trade group estimates that the new industry could create tens of thousands of jobs. “This is the most consequential milestone yet for the Golden State’s efforts to make offshore wind a key part of its diverse clean energy future.”

The leases allow the companies to develop construction plans that will need to go through a multiyear permitting and environmental review process before construction can begin, John Romero, public affairs officer at the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management said in an interview this past summer. The plans will include details like the number of wind turbines that will be built for each location.

Offshore wind farms are already generating power on the East Coast, where they could be drilled into the seafloor. In California, the area where wind is strongest is farther out to sea in deep water, which means that the turbines will have to be situated on floating platforms tethered to the ocean bottom.

There are some existing floating wind turbines in Europe, but the new technology has raised concerns among conservation, tribal and fishing groups about its potential impact on the West Coast. For example, the cables connecting the turbines to the sea floor could cause entanglements with whales or disrupt habitat on the sea floor, and the turbines could displace and kill seabirds.

One exploratory proposal considered by the Humboldt Bay Harbor District shows models of wind turbines around 1,000 feet high, taller than the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge. The turbines will likely have to be constructed on land and then towed out to sea, creating potential eyesores at the harbor and vessel traffic that could injure marine mammals.

“We think that it’s really important to make sure that clean energy projects move forward because we are at the very brink of a climate crisis,” said Irene Gutierrez, senior attorney at the environmental group Natural Resources Defense Council in an interview. “On the other hand, it is a very new technology. There are not that many wind projects that are fully operative and in the water. So there’s a lot of things that are unknown.”

“Leaseholders must commit to avoiding and minimizing environmental impacts and conducting additional research to fill in data gaps,” she added in an email.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management has [commissioned research on the potential impacts](#) to wildlife and the habitat, and the leases require that companies engage with stakeholders, including tribes and fishing groups, during the development process.

The agency funded a UC Santa Cruz study looking at the risks to seabirds. It concluded that if efforts are made to reduce detrimental impacts on them, the wind farms [could be a net positive for bird populations](#) in light of the overall devastating repercussions of climate change.

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