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S.F. port officials hope city can become a hub for wind turbine production

Wind turbines operate in Livermore. Port of San Francisco officials are vying for state approval to establish a manufacturing hub for a new kind of ocean-floating wind turbine platform.
Godofredo A. Vásquez/Associated Press 2022



By Julie Johnson

Fields of wind turbines planned off the California coast in the decades ahead are part of an ambitious effort to draw on ocean winds as a new source of clean power for the state.

None of those wind farms would be located outside the Golden Gate. But San Francisco port officials say their southern industrial waterfront is the perfect place to build them.

The type of floating wind turbines needed to harness California's blustery coastal conditions are rare — most turbines are affixed to the ocean floor — posing a technically challenging yet alluring opportunity for innovation and industry, according to the Port of San Francisco.

Port officials are vying for state approval to establish a manufacturing hub to develop and fabricate a new kind of floating platform necessary to generate energy off California's coast, where the steadiest wind patterns are found above deep waters.

"The jobs that would be created by this industry are exactly the kinds of jobs we've all been hoping for," said David Chiu, San Francisco city attorney and a former state Assembly member who has pushed the development of offshore wind power in California.

Elaine Forbes, the port's executive director, said in an interview they have no estimate yet for how many jobs this industry might generate for San Francisco.

But it's a promising opportunity to transform the port's industrial piers near the Bayview, currently used mostly for concrete production and destruction. And it would bring manufacturing jobs to the city and maritime-related industry back to the waterfront.

On Tuesday, port commissioners heard staff presentations on the merits of their endeavor, still in its early stages, to position the city's waterfront as a place where companies could become global leaders in floating turbine creation. Port staff aren't proposing to become a manufacturing hub for turbine towers because those structures — typically above 300 feet and expected to grow even taller in the coming decades — can't be floated upright below the Golden Gate and Bay bridges.

But the city is poised to be a central hub for manufacturing other components of offshore wind. Current wind fields are planned off Humboldt Bay to the north and Morro Bay in central California.

The California Energy Commission is developing a strategic plan for developing these new turbines, including all aspects of its supply chain, which will be presented to the Legislature and the California Natural Resources agencies at the end of June.

Andre Coleman, the port's maritime director, said they wanted to put San Francisco at the center of this nascent niche. "We have the acreage, we have the water, we have the workforce," Coleman said.

In 2021, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a new state law — AB525, authored by Chiu — that established the state's first offshore wind goals to have a generating capacity of at least 10 gigawatts by 2045. Then last year, the California Energy Commission called for an even more aggressive goal of 25 gigawatts of generation capacity from offshore wind within that same time frame — enough to power 25 million homes.

Ocean winds quicken as the sun sets down, positioning offshore wind as a critical source of clean energy to offset the pitfalls of solar power — only generated during the day, said Chiu. "This is not an issue of whether the technology is feasible, it's more an issue of whether California can get its act together," Chiu said. "This is an opportunity to be central to the international offshore wind industry."