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SLO County could see off-shore wind turbines by 2030, federal officials say

The Energy and Mineral Resources subcommittee hearing was held at the Morro Bay Community Center on Thursday, Sept. 8, 2022.
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San Luis Obispo County could see wind turbines floating off its shores in less than a decade if all goes as planned, federal officials said this week.

Members of the U.S. Congress held a field hearing at the Morro Bay Community Center on Thursday to highlight and discuss the work done to get floating offshore wind turbines in the Pacific Ocean.

The Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee of the Natural Resources Committee primarily focused on the proposed development off the coast of San Luis Obispo County, roughly 20 miles west of San Simeon and Cambria.

The so-called Morro Bay wind energy area is expected to generate 2.9 gigawatts of electricity at peak capacity should it be built out fully.

The subcommittee also discussed a smaller yet similar 1.6 gigawatt-electricity development proposed off the coast of Humboldt Bay.

In attendance were U.S. representatives Alan Lowenthal (D-Long Beach), Salud Carbajal (D-Santa Barbara), Jimmy Panetta (D-Carmel Valley), Connie Conway (R-Tulare) and Pete Stauber (R-Duluth, Minnesota). The subcommittee received testimony and asked questions of 14 witnesses across four panels.

The panelists included representatives from the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, U.S. Department of Defense, California Energy Commission, California State Assembly, San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors and Port of Long Beach.

Additionally, offshore wind industry, tribal, economic, fishing, local business and union representatives sat on the panels.

A main takeaway from the hearing came from Doug Boren, Pacific regional director of BOEM, who spoke during the first panel and said the federal government is on track to hold a lease sale auction this fall.

“The goal is ... to have these projects in the water by 2030,” Boren said of the proposed wind turbine developments.

Assemblymember Jordan Cunningham said during the hearing that he was worried about getting the turbines in the water so quickly, especially with the state’s goal to have 25 gigawatts of offshore wind capacity by 2045.

He noted that Senate Bill 846, which was recently signed into law by Gov. Gavin Newsom, created a streamlined permitting process to allow Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant to continue operating past its previously scheduled closure date of 2025.

“I think that same approach could be used for generating renewable energy assets,” Cunningham said. “This is an emergency, we need a reliable grid. We need to decarbonize (and) meet our goals.”

During the hearing, lawmakers asked whether San Luis Obispo County’s existing infrastructure could handle such a large offshore wind energy development.

Matthew Arms, director of environmental planning at the Port of Long Beach, said he is “taking a hard look at how the port can support the development of offshore wind.”

That could shift some or most of the offshore wind energy development activities — from building the turbines, receiving the parts, maintenance activities, shipping out the workforce and more — away from San Luis Obispo County to Los Angeles County.

Such a shift could hurt the economic potential provided by the offshore wind energy development, which local economic research group REACH said in a 2021 study could generate \$262 million for the Central Coast.

Josh Boswell, REACH's vice president of policy and economic development, said during the hearing that his organization is working on a feasibility study to help determine whether the Central Coast could support the offshore wind energy development. That study is expected to be published in the coming months, he said.

"The infrastructure options here appear even more promising," Boswell told the lawmakers during the hearing.

Boswell added that "proximity matters" from a port to the offshore wind energy development.

A port closer to the offshore wind energy development could result in fewer greenhouse gas emissions from transporting parts and workers, as well as less time in the water for large vessels and other benefits, he said.

This infrastructure question may come down to a "network" approach, Boswell noted, where multiple ports throughout the Central Coast provide certain aspects to the offshore wind energy development.

During the hearing, Jeremiah O'Brien, vice president of the Morro Bay Commercial Fisherman's Organization, said he's concerned about how the proposed development could potentially harm the fishing industry.

"Mitigation is a desperate tool for existence and survival in the near future and the buildout of these facilities will cause permanent damage to the commercial fishing industry on the coast," O'Brien said. "There is no amount of money that will save (our) eventual destruction."

Kourtney Vaccaro, the lead commissioner for offshore wind for the California Energy Commission, said her agency has suggested BOEM increase certain financial incentives to commercial wind energy developers to encourage community engagement and mitigation.

The Energy Commission has recommended BOEM to offer a credit to the winner of up to 50% off the end bidding price should they demonstrate certain commitments — which would include the creation and implementation of community agreements that benefit the businesses and ocean users impacted by the offshore wind energy development.

"This recommendation reflects ... the magnitude of investment required to establish a new industry in a way that minimizes impacts, maximizes benefits, and results in renewable energy generation (that) provides affordable power for our ratepayers and ensures a fair return to the United States," Vaccaro said during Thursday's hearing.

The hearing lasted nearly four hours on Thursday with no opportunity for public comment.

BOEM is still conducting an environmental assessment analyzing the potential impacts site surveys may have on the Morro Bay wind energy area.

That must be complete before a final sale notice is published outlining how the lease sale will be conducted and subsequent requirement for turbine companies.

To date, BOEM has held 10 competitive lease sales and has issued 25 active commercial offshore wind leases in the Atlantic Ocean from Massachusetts to North Carolina.

The Morro Bay and Humboldt lease sales will be the first in the Pacific region.