

State draft plan for ocean development due next month

The draft of a state plan could allow turbines within 1,500 feet of Cape's shore

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HYANNIS — Ready or not, here it comes.

The draft of a first-of-its-kind plan that could open state waters off the Cape and Islands to wind turbines and other renewable energy projects is due out next month.

Although details about the plan are scarce, turbines and other renewable energy technologies could be allowed in some locations as close as 1,500 feet from shore and as far away as three miles, the limit of state waters.

"It hadn't seemed to rise to the top of the pile for the community," said Mark London, executive director of the Martha's Vineyard Commission. "I don't think that people had really noticed that this was happening."

The state Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs has worked hard under a tight deadline to gather data for the ocean management plan, called for under the state Oceans Act of 2008, London and other local officials said yesterday. The law requires Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Ian Bowles to identify areas in the state's ocean waters suitable for development or protection and how they will be regulated.

Local officials said the draft ocean management plan, due for release by June 30, is likely to spark a lively public debate.

The release of draft maps showing where projects could be located would be one way to get the public more involved, Chris Powicki, president of the Cape and Islands Renewable Energy Collaborative, said yesterday during a meeting with the Times editorial board.

Powicki, an advocate of renewable energy and ocean development planning, questioned why state officials had not spent more time reaching out to residents of the Cape and Islands, where he believes the effects of ocean development will be felt the most.

"Why aren't they beating the bushes?" he said.

State officials showed maps of areas they were analyzing at a recent forum but declined to release the maps to the public, he said.

While Powicki emphasized that state officials have done an "incredible job pulling together what they have," he argued that the ocean management plan's deadline — a final version must be complete by the end of the year — may lead communities to feel disenfranchised.

State officials have done everything they can to encourage public involvement, said Deerin Babb-Brott, state assistant secretary for Oceans and Coastal Zone Management. He said there were 18 statewide "listening sessions" to gather public comment, 90 meetings with individual groups interested in activities that could be affected by the plan, five meetings of an ocean advisory committee, eight or nine meetings of a science advisory committee, and four public workshops (one of which was in Sandwich about a month ago and another in Woods Hole last week).

"We have comprehensively tried to get out into the community," he said.

But Babb-Brott said it was not possible to visit all 78 of the state's coastal communities. "Of course there are going to be folks out there who we haven't been able to go out and shake their hands and talk to them," he said.

Once the draft plan is released, there will be a minimum of four public hearings that will likely occur after Labor Day, Babb-Brott said.

Maps with tentative locations where renewable energy projects could be built are not yet complete, he said, but they will be included in the draft document released next month. "We haven't finalized all of the data layers that we want to apply," he said.

Ted Keon, director of coastal resources in Chatham, said he had not been able to attend forums that have been held on the plan and had heard few details about it.

"I don't know of much outreach besides the public meetings," he said.

Many of the meetings on the plan were heavily attended by representatives of organizations rather than the general public, said Glenn Wattlely, president and CEO of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, the lead opposition group in the fight against the proposed Nantucket Sound wind farm.

"It doesn't seem like the process is on the radar screen of the public," Wattlely said.

But state Sen. Robert O'Leary, D-Barnstable, who sits on the ocean advisory commission and helped write the Oceans Act, argued that public outreach has been extensive.

The draft plan will inevitably require more work, he said, but it is designed to be adaptive and must be updated at least every five years by law.

"They're struggling with how exactly do we establish lines in the ocean for what should happen and what shouldn't happen," O'Leary said of the plan's authors.

Richard Delaney, executive director of the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies and chairman of the governing board of the Massachusetts Ocean Partnership, an oceans advocacy group that has worked closely with the state on the ocean plan draft, said part of the problem is that the plan is so preliminary that the public has little to react to.

Once the draft plan is released, there will be more opportunity for the public to comment, he said. "That's when I expect that there will be more engagement from the citizenry."

On the web

www.mass.gov and search "Ocean Plan"

www.massoceanpartnership.org