

Wind turbines surge in U.S.

■ The increase in wind power nationwide has opponents seeking help from the government.

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STAMFORD, Conn. - Giant windmills are popping up on farms, scenic mountain ridges, prairie grass and now an Indian reservation, dramatically changing the nation's landscape and spinning a debate about where they belong.

Wind power grew rapidly in 2005, becoming more competitive as natural gas prices jumped and crude oil prices reached record highs. Improved technology, a federal tax credit and pressure on utilities to use clean energy sources helped



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Two wind turbines stand above Route 30 leading to Atlantic City, N.J. Attempts to build more turbines across the country are being met with opposition.

fuel the growth from coast to coast.

Officials in Atlantic City, N.J., dedicated the nation's first coastal wind farm in December. And last week, Fairfield-based General Electric Co. announced a startup near San Diego of the largest wind power farm on Indian land.

Wind power still makes up less than 1 percent of the nation's electricity, but experts expect wind to generate at least 5 percent by 2020.

"The wind resource in the United States is comparable to the oil resource in Saudi Arabia," said Tom Gray, deputy executive director of the American Wind Energy Association, an industry trade group. "It's a major strategic national resource we should be making every effort to develop."

While windmills may evoke quaint images of yesteryear, they're sparking growing debate, particularly as the first offshore projects are proposed in popular tourist areas, such as Cape Cod, Long Island, N.Y., and the New Jersey shore.

Wind projects have sparked complaints around the country that the windmills cause noise, obstruct scenic views and kill wildlife, including thousands of federally protected birds in California.

In Maryland, state officials have sought to limit 420-foot windmills atop the state's highest mountain ridge because of concerns about the impact to rare species.

A proposal to build offshore wind turbine towers along the New Jersey shore led to a 15-month moratorium on such projects while a special panel studies the issue.

A wind farm planned in a small town in Vermont has sparked criticism that the nearly 400-foot towers would ruin the rural landscape and hurt tourism.

The wind power added this year will offset the emission of approximately 7 billion pounds of carbon dioxide, equivalent to keeping nearly 500,000 SUVs off the road, said the American Wind Energy Association.

"If we could just find a way to make them invisible," Gray said, "we'd have something everybody could get behind."

Critics, including a member of the Kennedy family, worry that some projects could harm national treasures.

"All of a sudden you're transferring an asset used by 5 million people into the hands of private industrial speculators," said Robert F. Kennedy Jr., an environmentalist who has objected to the Cape Cod proposal.

The industry added about 2,500 megawatts of wind power this year, a record 35 percent increase, according to the association. The country's wind capacity is more than 9,200 megawatts in 30 states, enough for 2.4 million average U.S. homes.

In September, a report by the Government Accountability Office, Congress' investigative arm, found that the federal government offers minimal oversight in approving wind power plants. The report urged federal officials to take a more active role in weighing the impact of wind power farms on bird and bat deaths, saying local and state regulators sometimes lack the necessary expertise.