

Keep Cape Wind out of harm's way

By WILLIAM H. RYPKA

As both a professional pilot and a retired Coast Guard search-and-rescue pilot holding an airline transport pilot license in both twin-engine airplanes and helicopters, I have been paying close attention to the current debate over a congressional amendment to Coast Guard legislation that would ban the installation of offshore wind turbines within 1.5 nautical miles of established shipping lanes and ferry routes.

Cape Wind Associates is charging that this amendment could kill the project. My view, based on years of flying between Cape Cod and the Islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard and performing search-and-rescue missions for the Coast Guard, is that the Cape Wind project is not worth the risk it would pose to the lives of mariners and passengers in Nantucket Sound. Whether or not the amendment affects the Cape Wind project, the clear intent of the amendment is to protect public safety.

Unless Cape Wind is suggesting that we change how we fly through the Sound, the reality is that thousands of flights per month – especially in the

summer – take passengers to and from Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard directly through the area of the proposed wind farm. The Nantucket and Hyannis airports are among the heaviest traffic volume airports in the state and, in fact, in the entire New England region. Imagine a triangle of traffic among Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. Putting a huge wind farm right in the middle of that triangle just does not make sense.

The amendment being discussed in Washington is based on operational experience in Britain where installed offshore wind energy turbines have been found to confuse ship-to-ship radar and aviation radar because the turbine blades reflect the radar, sending

a "ping" to radar operators who cannot discern whether they are looking at a ship, an airplane, or an inadvertent radar bounce from a turbine blade.

As a Coast Guard pilot, I personally conducted numerous search-and-rescue missions in Nantucket Sound, so I can attest to the danger that already exists for mariners and pilots. Coast Guard helicopter searches are typically done in a grid pattern at an altitude of 100 to 200 feet. As difficult as it will be for boats to navigate these 130 steel towers, think about the pilots who are flying through

that airspace under difficult conditions amid a sea of steel turbines and spinning blades that are 160 feet long.

During a tour of duty in Alaska,

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I witnessed the devastation that resulted from the grounding of the Exxon Valdez in Prince William Sound. This grounding occurred in calm seas and clear weather in an open area that did not require precise navigation. The reef the ship struck was three miles outside the shipping lanes, much greater than the 1.5-mile buffer proposed.

Given the proximity of the proposed site to the shipping lanes within Nantucket Sound and the Sound's confined area, the potential for a collision with one of the windmills is huge. There are many days throughout the year that the fog in the Sound limits visibility to zero. If professional crews with state-of-the-art navigation can make mistakes when no fog is present, pleasure boaters without radar or GPS that transit the Sound would have a huge risk of colliding with one of the windmills.

We need to pursue alternative energy solutions, but putting these turbines in harm's way is not a solution. It is an accident waiting to happen.

William H. Rypka of Sandwich is a retired lieutenant commander with the U.S. Coast Guard.