

Grid operator urges Congress not to block wind farm proposal

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By Stephanie Ebbert, Globe Staff | May 4, 2006

The organization that manages the New England power grid is urging Congress not to block a wind farm proposed off the coast of the Cape and Islands, saying the region is in urgent need of new sources of energy.

Independent System Operator New England, a Holyoke-based nonprofit that runs the six-state power grid and oversees New England's wholesale electric markets, wrote a letter that also warned of a "perilous overreliance on natural gas as the primary fuel for power generation," and said the region needs to diversify its sources of power generation.

"To the extent we continue to rely on natural gas, we will continue to see higher costs for the region and a less reliable system," wrote Stephen Whitley, senior vice president and chief operating officer of ISO.

"The Cape Wind Project, and any other large alternative renewable energy project, offers a significant contribution to that end."

A flurry of new power plants, many using natural gas, were built between 1997 and 2003. But Cape Wind is the only major power plant now proposed in Massachusetts. Cape Wind Associates looks to generate wind power by building 130 wind turbines that it said could supply three-quarters of the energy used on the Cape and Islands.

Increasingly in recent months, ISO has been warning that New England faces a looming crisis as power demands outstrip the supply. As early as summer 2008, officials say, New England will face rolling blackouts to stretch existing power supplies. To stave off shortages, ISO's most recent regional system plan, which highlights anticipated electric needs, calls for new power generation by 2008.

Whitley said in his letter that the project has been "thoroughly reviewed" over years of permitting hearings and should be allowed to continue through the process.

But that assertion rankled the project's main opposition group, Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound. While supply and demand may point to a need for more alternative energy sources, "It doesn't necessarily follow that it's Cape Wind that we need and doesn't take into account the downside of Cape Wind," said assistant director Audra Parker.

Congress is considering a Coast Guard authorization bill that includes language that would give the governor of Massachusetts the authority to kill the project. Governor Mitt Romney is a strong opponent of the proposed location of the wind farm, but because the site is in federal waters, the state has limited ability to block it. ■