

Opponents say Cape Wind had 'sweetheart deal' Energy bill provision granted exemptions, prevented bidding

By Rick Klein, Globe Staff | May 5, 2006

WASHINGTON -- Opponents of a proposed wind farm off Cape Cod are taking aim at environmental groups and the project's developer, saying the Cape Wind company was the beneficiary of a "sweetheart deal" for exclusive rights to build on 24 square miles of Nantucket Sound.

In a full-page advertisement yesterday in the Washington newspaper Roll Call, the lead opposition group, the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, said "Cape Wind's friends in Congress" delivered a special deal for the company and its president, Jim Gordon. The ad urges members of Congress to support a Coast Guard bill that effectively would block the project.

"Imagine being handed over 15,000 acres of ocean just off of Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket," the ad said. "No standing in line. No messy competition to spoil your chances. One developer, and the deal of a lifetime."

The provision -- tucked into a mammoth energy bill that passed last year -- exempted Cape Wind and another company that is planning a wind farm off the coast of Long Island, N.Y., from new regulations for wind farms. It also spared Cape Wind from a competitive bidding process, in which other companies could bid to build a wind farm on the same site.

Cape Wind officials contend that it was fair for the company to be grandfathered under the existing regulations, because it had been working to build its turbines for years before the energy bill changed the rules governing offshore wind farms.

Company officials also said the exemption wasn't "slipped in" as opponents contend. It was part of the Senate Energy Committee's draft bill and was subject to debate and amendments on the Senate floor.

"Cape Wind has received no special treatment, and the alliance knows that," Mark Rodgers, a Cape Wind spokesman, said in a prepared statement. "At a time of soaring energy costs and concerns about secure and affordable energy supplies, this desperate and personal attack will fail to divert attention away from the benefits Cape Wind will provide to the public."

The alliance's contention that Cape Wind benefited from special treatment in Congress is occurring amid controversy over Senator Edward M. Kennedy's attempts to block the farm, which would be off the coast of his Hyannis Port home. Kennedy worked behind the scenes with other senators to put a provision into the Coast Guard bill to give Governor Mitt Romney -- another opponent -- the ability to veto the project even if it clears all other legal hurdles.

Despite Kennedy's push, several Congress members are seeking to keep the wind farm on track as gas prices remain near record highs. The chairman and top Democrat on the Senate Energy Committee -- Senators Pete V. Domenici and Jeff Bingaman, both of New Mexico -- said yesterday that they will try to defeat the entire Coast Guard bill if the provision blocking the wind farm isn't removed.

"It sets a terrible precedent," Domenici said. "It would be a very bad idea to give states veto authority over the siting of renewable energy projects on federal land in a bid to stop a particular project."

A group of House members is mounting a similar effort. "We're going to look for an opportunity to remove that language," said Representative James R. Langevin, Democrat of Rhode Island. "The country has to get serious about developing a long-term national energy policy."

But Kennedy said he is not backing down.

"Nantucket Sound is public property, and it's not right for one developer to control its fate without competing," he said. ■