

Delahunt: Set zones for offshore energy tests

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He's been a critic of the proposed Nantucket Sound wind farm since nearly day one, but U.S. Rep. William Delahunt says he doesn't oppose all wind projects.

In fact, with the Northeast facing electricity shortages as soon as next year, the Cape's congressman has offered up the Bay State as a pioneer in an assortment of offshore energy projects.

As long as they're not too close to shore.

In a letter sent to Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman this week, Delahunt urged the creation of "Ocean Energy Research and Development" zones off the New England coastline to test emerging technologies such as wave energy and, yes, wind turbines.

But the Quincy Democrat said yesterday development of those energy sources must fall within a comprehensive regulatory framework that he argues did not exist when review of Cape Wind Associates' proposed turbines began five years ago.

"One positive aspect of the Cape Wind project is that there is now a public discussion going on," Delahunt said. "But we have to be aware there are technologies out there that have the potential to expand beyond what we can currently imagine to provide renewable energy sources."

Critical juncture

Delahunt's suggestion comes at a critical point in both the Cape Wind review and the debate over how to meet the region's growing energy demands.

In the next couple of weeks, Congress is expected to consider a controversial amendment to an \$8.7 billion Coast Guard bill that would grant the Massachusetts governor authority to veto the Cape Wind project even though it is proposed for federal waters. Earlier this week, ISO New England, the nonprofit agency that controls the New England electricity grid, pressed lawmakers to scrap the amendment, predicting the region could face rolling blackouts if more sources of power are not brought online.

Partnerships urged

A helpful model in developing an offshore energy framework, Delahunt says, is a partnership formed between the Department of Energy, General Electric and the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative. Last year, the private-public partnership published a blueprint for making offshore wind successful in the United States.

In March, GE and the energy department announced plans to develop the next generation of

offshore wind turbines that stands taller, generates more power and can operate in waters deeper than Nantucket Sound.

Greg Watson, vice president for sustainable development and renewable energy for the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, agrees partnerships are critical to the success of the wind farm industry. He also welcomes Delahunt to the table, calling him the first congressman to suggest that a "test bed" for offshore projects be established off the coast of his district.

But Watson added that near-shore projects such as Cape Wind could provide essential lessons needed to advance the wind power industry.

"We want to weigh a lot of reasonable alternatives as to how we can make this work," Watson said yesterday. "But we're going to need to have some experience in shallow waters."

If Delahunt's goal is to make Massachusetts a leader in renewable energy, Cape Wind spokesman Mark Rodgers said, the congressman already has the perfect opportunity with the Nantucket Sound proposal.

"The easiest way for Massachusetts to become a leader in renewable energy is to build Cape Wind," Rodgers said. "What better place to start than a very windy place here in his own district."

Delahunt said he is committed to finding a better place than Nantucket Sound because he doesn't see Cape Wind being approved anytime soon.

"There are so many unanswered questions," he said. "And whatever happens, it's going to produce interminable litigation. ... It's not going to be sooner than later. It's going to be later than sooner."

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(Published: May 5, 2006)

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