

45 days of avian research drawing to a close; mostly gulls observed

By Jack Coleman

ON BOARD THE FISHING BOAT "MINUTEMAN" ON NANTUCKET SOUND -- US Sen. Lincoln Chafee, R-R.I., counted himself a supporter of Cape Wind before he boarded a charter fishing boat yesterday for a firsthand look at Horseshoe Shoal, where the wind farm would be built.

Yesterday's three-hour cruise through the Sound reinforced Chafee's support. "We can't keep talking about renewable energy without putting some commitment behind it," Chafee said. "I want to listen to every point of view and the point of view I get from the opposition is visual pollution."

The trip from Falmouth was one of two arranged on consecutive days by Cape Wind to bring journalists to an avian research barge on Horseshoe Shoal, where the 130-turbine project would be built.

Kennedy's stealth moves and Chafee's response

For more than three months, lawmakers in Washington have wrestled with proposals from opponents of Cape Wind, most notably Sen. Ted Kennedy, to derail what could become the nation's first



The avian research barge Robert E. Hayes on Horseshoe Shoal in Nantucket Sound, where it is nearing the end of a 45-day period of research timed to coincide with the spring bird migration.



Rhode Island Senator Lincoln Chafee talks with avian

offshore wind farm.

First came an amendment to ban offshore wind turbines within 1.5 miles of shipping and ferry lanes, then another to give the governor of Massachusetts unilateral veto power over Cape Wind. This was followed late last week by Kennedy's announcement he was withdrawing his support for a governor's veto in place of giving one to the commandant of the Coast Guard - but once again, for Cape Wind only and no other project.

Chafee said he had yet to see the specifics of the most recent proposal, but is inclined to oppose it since it would provide the authority to sideline the Cape Wind project with a single person. "It should be a little more analytical," Chafee said. "If the issue is navigation, I want to have a fair process."

Chafee said he also wants to learn more about claims by Cape Wind opponents that wind turbines can interfere with radar on vessels and planes.

After stopping at the research barge, the Minuteman made a loop around Cape Wind's data tower between a half-mile and a mile away.

The Senate has been in recess this week and returns to Washington on Monday.

The Minuteman meets the Robert E. Hayes

When the Minuteman arrived at the avian research barge Robert E. Hayes yesterday, the waters of the Sound were too choppy to allow Chafee and two aides to hop on board from the charter boat.

Once a line from the Minuteman was fastened to the barge, Chafee and others on the Minuteman asked several questions about their work.

The 45-day research project, timed to coincide with the spring migration, was initiated by Cape Wind as part of an agreement with Mass Audubon in March when

researcher David Pitts during yesterday's trip to Horseshoe Shoal.



Senator Lincoln Chafee on the stern of the fishing charter boat Minuteman, with Cape Wind's data tower on Horseshoe Shoal in the background. Note waves breaking on shoal. (photos, Jack Coleman)

"If the issue is navigation, I want to have a fair process."

- Senator Chafee

Audubon gave its preliminary approval of the project contingent on Cape Wind conducting more avian studies on Nantucket Sound. The cost of the research will range from \$400,000 to \$450,000, according to Cape Wind.

Rotating crews on the barge are using radar and binoculars to record the number of birds on Horseshoe Shoal and their flight habits. What have you seen, Chafee asked. "Right now mostly it's gulls," said radar operator David Pitts, along with a few dozen common terns and the occasional roseate tern.

The crews are aided by two radar systems: an S-band horizontal sweep extending four miles in each direction and an F-band vertical which tracks to an altitude of 4,000 feet.

Plenty of gulls and no draggers

Pitts said he could not provide a range of figures on the number of birds passing through the shoal until the data had been processed. Yesterday's blustery conditions were typical of the site, he said. By the time the research ends tomorrow, Pitts will have spent a month on the site. Only three of those days were calm, he said.

"It would be a pretty good spot to get energy from wind," Pitts said.

On the trip back to Falmouth, where his family has run the Patriot Party Boats charter business in local waters for more than 40 years, Minuteman captain Jim Tietje disputed assertions that the wind farm will harm commercial fishing.

"It's a proven fact that any structure you put in the water will improve the fishing," Tietje said, referring to artificial reefs. "I think that in five years, or 50 years, there will be a wind farm out here. The need is only going to get greater." "It's not 'if' -- it's 'when,'" Tietje said.

Tietje said he spends at least 45 days a year bringing fishing charters to Horseshoe Shoal in search of scup, sea bass and fluke.

As for commercial fishing where Cape Wind wants to build its wind farm, "I've never seen a dragger on Horseshoe Shoal in all the years I've been out there," Tietje said. All told, he's plied the waters of Nantucket Sound and Vineyard Sound for a quarter of a century. The family business includes a third vessel running passengers between Falmouth and Oak Bluffs, mainly construction workers and tradesmen.

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Chafee said Cape Wind would also help southern New England gain an invaluable foothold in the emerging industry of renewable energy, which is growing rapidly around the world. As an example of a local company that would benefit from offshore wind farms, Chafee cited TPI Composites Inc., a manufacturer of wind energy system components and composite turbine blades. "They are on the cutting edge," Chafee said.

Helping nurture this new industry in southern New England would also cushion the shock for many people when the economy sours. "It's not just sailboats" that Rhode Islanders would be building," Chafee said. "If we have a downturn, it's still keeping people employed." Fossil fuels are finite, said Chafee, an avid sailor. "But the wind -- I think that's going to blow for a long, long time."

Jack Coleman is a writer, copy editor and blogger who advocates in support of Cape Wind at the wind farmer's almanac blog. He is also media consultant to Clean Power Now, a citizens' advocacy group based on Cape Cod that supports viable renewable energy projects in the waters off Cape Cod and the islands.

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