

Mass. is urged to lead the way on wind farms

State can reap jobs, backers say

By Rick Klein, Globe Staff | June 3, 2006

WASHINGTON -- Massachusetts business and political leaders are urging the state to embrace offshore wind power as a way to attract thousands of new jobs and meet the region's growing energy needs, arguing that the Bay State can stand at the forefront of an emerging multibillion-dollar wind energy market.

As opposition swirls around proposals for giant wind farms off the Massachusetts coast, other states are beginning to ease the path to such projects with state-sponsored initiatives designed to fast-track development.

The state that green-lights the first series of large projects could become a hub for a rapidly growing industry, said Greg Watson, vice president for renewable energy programs at the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, a quasi-public development agency. Those states will attract jobs in everything from research and development to manufacturing and maintenance, and will provide a renewable source of energy for residents and businesses, he said.

"Whoever gets these projects going first is going to be well-positioned to reap the economic benefits," Watson said. "We have a strategically placed natural resource that gives us an advantage. We've got to get some projects in the water."

US Representative William Delahunt has begun convening meetings of energy industry officials, environmentalists, and union leaders to find a way to make commercial-scale wind projects a reality off the Massachusetts coast. Business groups including the New England Council also are pushing for an easier path to wind energy development, and Delahunt said venture capital firms have begun expressing interest in investing in such projects.

Delahunt, whose district covers much of the state's southern coastline, is asking local communities and the federal government to identify offshore sites that can be used for wind farms, to help avoid the fierce local battles that are threatening to delay wind energy proposals for Nantucket Sound and Buzzards Bay.

"There's no doubt that there's a demand for this, and we're particularly well-suited to take advantage of it," said Delahunt, a Quincy Democrat. "It's really exciting in terms of the possibilities."

Delahunt also sent a letter to Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman asking to establish "research and development zones" -- areas set aside from environmental restrictions -- in federal waters off of Massachusetts where test turbines could be built by public-private partnerships.

State Senator Robert O'Leary, a Barnstable Democrat, is preparing a bill in the Legislature that would set up a mechanism for cities and towns to propose sites for development in closer-to-shore state waters, easing the path for developers in those areas.

Amid concerns over global warming and the nation's dependence on foreign sources of oil, industry analysts estimate that the global wind energy market will triple to \$45 billion a year within the next decade. New research into offshore energy make water-based wind farms some of the most attractive options, with deeper waters offering the best opportunities, Watson said.

Massachusetts -- with its blustery coastline, cluster of research institutions, and large, power-hungry population -- is an attractive venue for developers interested in building offshore wind farms.

A 2004 study endorsed by the Department of Energy found wind speeds along virtually all of the

Massachusetts coast would be "excellent" or "outstanding" for wind-generated electricity. Sites around Cape Cod, Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, and the South Shore hold the most potential, according to the study.

John P. Holdren, director of the Woods Hole Research Center in Falmouth, said the New England coast represents the most promising area of the country for offshore wind energy.

"The wind option is too good to miss," Holdren said. "We ought to be leading this charge, rather than resisting it."

Several Massachusetts cities and towns are taking their own steps to construct individual turbines to power municipal buildings. But large-scale commercial projects have stalled in the state.

The Cape Wind Associates proposal to build windmills over 24 square miles of Nantucket Sound is five years old, yet the political battle over it has shown no signs of subsiding. A proposal floated last month by developer Jay M. Cashman for a wind farm in Buzzards Bay has generated intense local opposition from those worried about its impact on fishing and navigation.

Meanwhile, several European countries and states including New Jersey and Texas recently launched new initiatives designed to harness offshore wind. Rhode Island is conducting a state-sponsored survey of promising wind sites, and is considering having the state handle all permitting for wind projects.

"We want to make it easy for developers to get this done," said Andrew Dzykewicz, the chief energy adviser to Governor Donald L. Carcieri of Rhode Island. "It's important to prevent the typical wheel-spinning. We think it's a great opportunity, and we want to exploit it."

Delahunt said that the lesson of the Cape Wind project -- which he opposes -- is that local communities should be involved in choosing the sites for wind farms. The initiatives he is pushing would ease the way for small-scale test sites to be built in state and federal waters off the Massachusetts coast.

Those sites -- which would be identified in consultation with municipal leaders, industry officials, and other stakeholders -- could be used to generate interest among developers, who would then bid to build commercial-scale projects on public waters.

Cities and towns could negotiate rent-style arrangements with developers, attract new jobs associated with the construction and maintenance of turbines, and save money with a potentially cheaper energy source, Delahunt said. Some cities and towns say they would welcome the opportunity to play a role in deciding where to place possible wind farms.

"I do think local control and local acceptance is paramount in something of this nature," said Kevin Donovan, town administrator in Kingston, which is considering a plan to build a wind turbine. "It's either working with a developer or the community working on it -- it seems it would make far more prudent sense to see a community spark that initiative."

In Hull, where two windmills are spinning and plans are moving forward for a small offshore wind farm, local leaders say collaboration with towns and cities could be the key to moving larger-scale projects forward.

"You'd have a welcoming community, a community that would want turbines," said John MacLeod, operations manager of the Hull Municipal Light Department. "If a community were interested in doing something, it would possibly assist or push the private utilities into putting more wind turbines."

O'Leary said it is too early to gauge interest in large-scale commercial wind farms -- the 100-plus turbine installations that would tower over miles of ocean -- but said cities and towns need a formal mechanism to decide what works for them.

"Communities are out there trying to figure out something," O'Leary said. "I don't know how many communities will step forward, but it's worth exploring."

Still, the push for local involvement in wind farms is being viewed skeptically by some supporters of Cape Wind's proposal for Nantucket Sound. The project has faced strong opposition from many Massachusetts political leaders -- including Delahunt, O'Leary, Governor Mitt Romney and US Senator Edward M. Kennedy -- and its backers say they fear that any new procedures for building wind farms could be used to further delay construction.

``It's reasonable to assume that this is tied to their opposition to Cape Wind," said Sue Reid, a lawyer at the Conservation Law Foundation, a group that supports the project. ``We hope that this effort has some legitimacy that's separate entirely from Cape Wind."

Reid added that any process that involves local communities must stop short of offering them the power to veto proposals for off their waters. That would be a recipe for paralysis, she said, with ``not in my backyard" sentiments potentially delaying construction indefinitely.

A Cape Wind spokesman, Mark Rodgers , said efforts to find new sites for wind farms would not have any impact on the company's efforts to build a wind farm in Nantucket Sound, a proposal that is working its way through the regulatory pipeline. But he added that if Delahunt is serious about his support for wind energy, he should reconsider his opposition to Cape Wind.

``The Cape Wind project becoming a reality would greatly enhance Congressman Delahunt's stated objectives," Rodgers said.

Delahunt has said his opposition to Cape Wind stems from its potential to harm an ecologically fragile environment . But he said the state shouldn't let the controversy over Cape Wind delay action on other wind projects.

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