

New face of the Cape Wind debate

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Just two months ago, some were ready to write the obituary for the proposed Nantucket Sound wind farm.

Federal lawmakers were poised to give Bay State Gov. Mitt Romney - a longtime project opponent - veto authority over Cape Wind Associates' offshore plan.

Then came the letters of protest, a string of stinging editorials in national newspapers and, most critically, opposition to the policy from key members of Congress across the country.

Yesterday, the shift in debate was complete, as House lawmakers approved unanimously a provision that instead gives strict authority over the Cape proposal - and no other - to the commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Specifically, the Coast Guard commandant will decide whether the project would pose a navigational threat in Nantucket Sound.

For now, that determination would fall to Adm. Thad Allen, a Coast Guard veteran who took over the federal response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster and this spring was appointed the Coast Guard's top official.

Both sides of the Cape Wind debate say publicly that the Coast Guard's new role will help their cause.

Cape Wind supporters, having dodged what they called another back-room political effort to doom the project, hope putting the project's fate in Allen's hands will remove politics from the debate.

"Agencies have to follow standards without being arbitrary or capricious," said Matt Palmer, executive director of the Cape-based Clean Power Now. "Politicians do not. They can be as arbitrary or capricious as they want."

Coast Guard "will be fair"

The siting of offshore renewable projects is new to the federal government. The Department of Interior is currently developing a national policy for renewable energy projects on the Outer Continental Shelf. And the Coast Guard, too, is crafting its own guidelines.

U.S. Rep. William Delahunt, the Cape's congressman and a project opponent, said the Coast Guard is the right agency to judge navigational threats.

"I have great confidence in the Coast Guard," Delahunt said yesterday. "I just know they'll conduct a process that's thorough, that's exhaustive and that will be fair."

The new policy on Cape Wind was inserted into an \$8.7 billion Coast Guard reauthorization bill, which will now go to President George W. Bush. The president will have 10 days to sign the bill into law after receiving it.

Under the new provision, the Coast Guard has authority to judge whether the Nantucket Sound project - an ambitious plan that would put 130 417-foot turbines on Horseshoe Shoal - poses navigational threats. The Coast Guard would also be granted authority to require "reasonable" conditions to remove those threats.

Cape Wind opponents say that could include altering the location of turbines or the number of turbines.

Coast Guard officials must make those decisions not later than 60 days before the Department of Interior releases a new draft environmental impact statement on the Cape Wind proposal - something expected by the end of the year.

Lead official for Katrina

Allen assumed the role of commandant on May 25.

An Arizona native, he was designated the lead federal official for the Hurricane Katrina response after former FEMA director Michael Brown was removed from the job.

Allen also formerly served as chairman of the Department of Homeland Security's Joint Requirements Council.

In recent weeks, Allen has met with Romney and Delahunt to discuss regional issues, including Cape Wind.

"This is one of the things they talked about," Cmdr. Brendan McPherson, a Coast Guard spokesman, said of the recent meeting with Romney. "It's something (Allen) is keeping an eye on."

Until now, the Coast Guard has played only an advisory role in the Cape Wind review.

In February 2005, Capt. Mary Landry, head of the Coast Guard's Marine Safety Office in Providence, asked the Army Corps of Engineers - then the lead agency reviewing Cape Wind - to do additional analysis on potential navigational risks to commercial boat traffic.

Landry also asked that an environmental report address whether the turbines would interfere with marine radar, an issue the Department of Defense is now investigating.

Cape Wind confident

Mark Rodgers, a Cape Wind spokesman, said yesterday company officials are confident the Coast Guard review will be professional and fact-based. He also expressed hope that local Coast Guard staff familiar with Cape waters would help Allen reach his conclusions.

"Generally, (administrators) are all busy people who have a lot to do," he said. "And they rely a lot on people on the ground who have the expertise."

Angela McArdle, another Coast Guard spokeswoman, yesterday confirmed that local Coast Guard officials will play a role in the agency's deliberations. "In decision-making, generally throughout the Coast Guard, we tend to empower local folks," McArdle said. "Our role at headquarters is to provide the guidance and make sure they have the tools they need to apply their local knowledge."

But even if the Coast Guard concludes the turbines pose no navigational risk, some wind farm opponents, including U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy, concede that wouldn't erase all of their concerns. "There are still some outstanding questions with respect to the project," Kennedy said last week.

Delahunt agreed. "I have no doubt that whatever (the Coast Guard) requires will be subject to multiple interpretations.

"As I've said all along, this project is destined for litigation that will be interminable."

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