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Nation's Largest Offshore Wind Farm Will Be Built Off Long Island



The Long Island Power Authority's board on Wednesday approved a wind farm for the waters between the eastern tip of Long Island and Martha's Vineyard. "It is the largest project to date, but it will not be the last project," said Thomas Falcone, center, chief executive of the utility. Donna Alberico for The New York Times

By Diane Cardwell

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UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Seeking to meet growing electric demand in the Hamptons with renewable energy, the Long Island Power Authority approved the nation's largest offshore wind farm on Wednesday, set for the waters between the eastern tip of Long Island and Martha's Vineyard.

The farm, with as many as 15 turbines capable of powering 50,000 average homes over all, is the first of several planned by the developer, Deepwater Wind. It will be in a 256-square-mile parcel, with room for as many as 200 turbines, that the company is leasing from the federal government.

“It is the largest project to date, but it will not be the last project,” the power authority’s chief executive, Thomas Falcone, said before the vote as a crowd of supporters erupted in whoops and applause.

Wind power has struggled to take off in the United States, but the Long Island project signals that the long-awaited promise of a new, lower-carbon source of electricity is poised to become part of the national energy mix.

It has been given new life by New York’s push to meet Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo’s goal of drawing 50 percent of the state’s power from renewable sources by 2030. That goal includes 2.4 gigawatts of offshore wind, enough to power 1.25 million homes. It is the largest commitment to offshore wind in the country and is part of the state’s way of showing the nascent industry it is serious about developing the resource.

“This project will not only provide a new, reliable source of clean energy but will also create high-paying jobs, continue our efforts to combat climate change and help preserve our environment,” Mr. Cuomo said Wednesday in a statement, two weeks after he publicly called for the power authority to approve the proposal.

The project’s cost was projected at \$1 billion but is now expected to be \$740 million. Deepwater plans to finance the project with loans and equity investments, according to Jeffrey Grybowski, the company’s chief executive. Mr. Grybowski expressed confidence that the project would qualify for an investment tax credit, set to phase out at the end of 2019, that is worth 24 percent of the development’s cost. Whether it does, however, could be open to interpretation by the Treasury.

The turbines, each roughly 600 feet tall, would be connected to a substation in East Hampton by a 50-mile undersea cable. The town has a goal of its own: meeting all of its electric demand with renewable energy by 2020.

Other offshore wind projects, notably one off Cape Cod, have encountered opposition over their effect on ocean views. But Deepwater has said the turbines supplying East Hampton would not be visible from Montauk, on the tip of Long Island, and would barely be visible from Martha’s Vineyard, 15 miles away.

The approval comes six weeks after the nation’s only other functioning offshore wind-energy farm — a Deepwater project in Rhode Island state waters off Block Island — began serving customers on the grid.

Big multinational developers like Statoil and Dong Energy are also investing in the business, snapping up leases for ocean parcels with the aim of competing for utility contracts in Maryland, Massachusetts and New York. The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority is putting together an offshore wind master plan to guide development, including a swath south of the Rockaways.

The projects have all faced some opposition, some of it from commercial fisheries concerned that the turbines, attached to the seafloor, will disrupt their businesses and consumers worried about higher electricity prices. The power authority, which plans to buy all of the Long Island farm's output over 20 years, says the cost is about the same as its other renewable energy projects, about 16 cents a kilowatt-hour. Its average electricity price is 7.5 cents a kilowatt-hour, so the project is expected to add \$1.19 a month to the average customer bill.

No opposition was in evidence as the authority voted at a public meeting at its headquarters here. Several supporters praised the proposal as a way to move the electric system off fossil fuels to slow climate change, and as an engine for jobs. But much remains to be done before those benefits materialize.

First, the developers must study and map the ocean floor to determine precisely where and how to anchor each turbine, and then go through the federal and state permitting processes. The farm is to begin transmitting power by the end of 2022, so Deepwater would need to start construction no later than 2020.

“We think that thousands of megawatts are going to be built off the coast of the United States in the coming decades,” Mr. Grybowski said. “It’s an enormous clean energy resource. It’s easy for us to tap into it, but we need projects to get from essentially one project to these thousands of megawatts.”

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