

CALIFORNIA

Biden reverses Trump's 'milestone' offshore wind plan

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The Trump administration's last action on offshore wind received blowback from advocates before being nixed by President Biden. Department of Energy

A last-minute action hailed by the outgoing Trump administration as a "historic milestone" in promoting the first West Coast offshore wind projects was reversed by President Biden last week.

The Jan. 19 move from Trump Interior Department officials would have jump-started environmental reviews of potential wind lease areas located off the central and northern coast of California — a state eyed by major developers as the nation's biggest single source of offshore wind power. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management plan included a notice of intent filed in the *Federal Register* to prepare reviews for two potential offshore sites, as well as a call for nominations on a third area.

"After collaboration with the State of California in extensive data gathering and initial engagement with ocean users, tribes, local communities and the general public, BOEM has identified areas of consideration for potential future commercial wind energy leasing in Federal waters off the coast of California," the Trump announcement said.

The Trump plan seemed to herald a breakthrough in ongoing negotiations with the military, which has opposed offshore wind development in some areas out of concern it would disrupt training exercises in central California waters.

Yet the announcement was criticized as a parting shot by some of the industry's main proponents, who accused the outgoing administration of attempting to go over the heads of state energy officials, California lawmakers and local residents.

Rep. Salud Carbajal (D-Calif.), a former Marine from a central California district who has spearheaded talks with the military over West Coast offshore wind, said the move "completely ignored" eight months of careful deliberations over where turbines might cause the least disruption.

Spokespeople for California's Energy Commission, which serves on a Carbajal-led working group along with the Defense and Interior departments, said on Biden's first day in office that they did not support the Trump administration's move.

"We do not support this action and anticipate that it will be withdrawn shortly," wrote Lindsay Buckley, spokesperson for the commission, in an email to E&E News.

Adam Stern, executive director of Offshore Wind California, whose members include developers Ørsted AS and Equinor ASA, called the Trump administration proposal a "wolf in sheep's clothing — a plan designed to look like progress, but sure to lead to conflict and delay."

The pushback came because Trump's plan would have included areas for potential offshore wind development that received heavy criticism from coastal wildlife authorities, real estate interests, environmentalists, fishermen and labor groups. They had warned that turbines in certain areas would be too close to shore, block access to fishing grounds or threaten protected marine sanctuaries ([Energywire](#), Oct. 21, 2020).

The criticized areas were located adjacent to a central California zone originally examined by BOEM for development.

Spokespeople for BOEM did not comment in response to E&E News questions. Queries sent to multiple Trump-era Interior appointees went unanswered.

Spokespeople for the Navy, which has acted as the Pentagon's lead in offshore wind negotiations, said the department was "committed to continuing" talks on the multiagency working group in California.

'Inappropriate' offshore wind

In California, wind developers have grown impatient with the speed of negotiations among state and federal officials and the military over offshore wind. Those negotiations first

began in 2018, when Trump's BOEM launched its formal consideration of three distinct areas for offshore wind located off the north, central and south coasts of the state.

In late December, three trade groups representing California's wind industry [wrote](#) to Gov. Gavin Newsom (D), urging him to "take several immediate steps to launch the offshore wind industry," including requesting a federal lease auction by the end of this year.

Trump's BOEM would have laid groundwork for that, announcing the agency's intent to carry out environmental reviews and gather information from the public — including in the offshore areas opposed by California officials and groups.

On Trump's last day, the agency also gave a lease for the first-ever wave energy testing center on the West Coast — currently the only operational wave pilot in the United States ([Energywire](#), Jan. 21). And it unveiled a new agreement with the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement under which the latter agency will conduct oversight work for renewable projects, which was supported by offshore wind groups as a measure that would streamline permitting.

After the inauguration, Biden chief of staff Ron Klain issued a memo ordering agencies to "immediately withdraw" any Trump-era rules that had been sent to the *Federal Register* but not yet published. BOEM took down the California announcement from its webpage that same day.

A source familiar with the Biden administration's thinking told E&E News that it had acted to withdraw the announcement because BOEM had not "adequately consulted" over the possibility of launching new lease areas.

Some of the areas that would have been undergone environmental review, the source added, were "inappropriate" for wind development.

Biden's reversal raises questions about whether the military's stance on offshore wind areas will evolve. The Department of Defense has conditioned its support for wind areas off the California coast on having a ban on development in other parts of the Pacific Ocean where they can carry out their training activities. Spokespeople from the Navy did not respond to questions about whether that would continue to be a condition.

Offshore wind advocates say they believe the new president will deliver on his campaign promise to double the industry's size.

In an Inauguration Day statement, CEO of the Business Network for Offshore Wind Liz Burdock said she believed Biden would "usher in a new era."

"This is the opportunity the offshore wind industry has waited for," she said.