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Interior advances California floating wind project

Interior Department officials are considering letting wind developers build turbines in central California waters. Nearby Morro Rock is pictured. Sandra Foyt/Flickr



A federal environmental review found that issuing up to three leases in the Morro Bay Wind Energy Area would result in either negligible or minor impacts on marine habitats, protected species, commercial and recreational fishing, and cultural or historical resources.

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ENERGYWIRE | California's offshore wind dreams moved closer to reality this week when federal regulators declared that turbines would have no significant impact to natural resources off the state's central coast.

[An environmental review](#) by the Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) effectively cleared the way for projects in the proposed 376-square-mile Morro Bay Wind Energy Area, a site that could hold up to 3 gigawatts of capacity.

BOEM found that issuing as many as three wind leases there would result in either negligible or minor impacts on marine habitats, protected species, commercial and recreational fishing, and cultural or historical resources, among other things.

In a statement, BOEM Director Amanda Lefton called the review's completion "an important step forward" for clean energy, the economy and union jobs in central California.

The review's conclusions were similar to those from a separate BOEM environmental review last May regarding the emergence of floating wind in Northern California waters.

There and along California's central coast, many lawmakers are eager to support a new renewable industry that they see as a job creator. On Thursday, Rep. Salud Carbajal, a Democrat from the central coast that has long petitioned for federal wind leases in the area, applauded the review's completion. "The Central Coast is poised to be a renewable energy powerhouse, & this is a huge step forward!" Carbajal wrote in a Twitter post.

Both wind areas in California would require the debut of a technology never seen in American waters: turbines that would rest on a floating platform lashed to the seabed. All of the Atlantic Coast's offshore wind projects involve driving turbine foundations directly into the seafloor. California's Pacific waters are too deep for that more established fixed-bottom turbine. The floating turbines are currently far more expensive and not as widely used globally.

California and Interior are nonetheless intent on turning the state's waters into a national hub for offshore wind. California energy regulators have approved a goal of building 25 gigawatts worth by 2045, enough for about 25 million homes. That target is the largest of any state ([Energywire](#), Aug. 11).

By 2035, the Biden administration wants to build 15 GW of floating offshore wind. Much of that is likely to be sited off of California, along with other West Coast states and Maine. In the intervening years, the Department of Energy wants to start slashing the cost of floating wind by improving equipment designs, planning out port renovations and undertaking other preparations under the auspices of the department's Earthshot initiative. By 2035, DOE hopes to reduce the cost of floating wind by 70 percent, to about \$45 per megawatt-hour ([E&E News PM](#), Sept. 15).

But plenty remains to be sorted out if the new floating wind industry is to emerge in California. In central California, fishing industry groups have expressed concern about losing access to fishing grounds due to the construction of turbines. The Department of Defense, which for years blocked development of wind areas in order to protect its own access to offshore training areas, has said it is continuing to assess the compatibility of wind projects near Morro Bay. And even some conservationists are unsure whether California's 2045 goal was too hastily declared ([Energywire](#), July 26).

NOAA is also proposing to create a 7,000-square-mile marine sanctuary that could border the Morro Bay wind areas to the southeast. The Northern Chumash Tribal Council, which in 2015 proposed the sanctuary as a model of environmental justice that would protect sacred ancestral sites, have expressed worries about whether transmission cables or wind turbines would be sited in ways that clash with the tribe's desires ([E&E Daily](#), Sept. 9).

Meanwhile, some offshore wind developers have pressed Interior to ensure the sanctuary does not interfere with their ability to connect transmission cables to shore, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. Offshore Wind California, a trade group with major wind developers as members, gave little hint of such concerns Thursday, saying in a statement that the conclusion of BOEM's environmental review was "more good news for floating offshore wind in California."

"This environmental review marks another important step forward for offshore wind in California and sets the stage for BOEM to proceed with its initial lease auction" at both the central and Northern California wind areas this fall, said Adam Stern, the trade group's executive director.

In its review, BOEM asserted that issuing three wind leases within the Morro Bay area "would not impact the designation process for the proposed marine sanctuary."

If wind developers do eventually propose specific projects in the Morro Bay area, their construction and operation plans would need to contain an independent environmental analysis that considers the proposed sanctuary, BOEM spokesperson John Romero said in an email to E&E News.

BOEM is also a "cooperating agency" for the designation of the marine sanctuary and works with Commerce Department's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries on offshore wind siting, Romero said.

Wind development in the Morro Bay area and the NOAA sanctuary designation would support the Biden administration's "important and complementary" goals of ocean conservation and offshore wind development, he wrote.