

RECHARGE

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New US offshore wind chief regulator Klein 'aggressively optimistic' despite backlash

Liz Klein recently assumed the director's role at BOEM.
Photo: Department of Interior



Recently installed director of Bureau of Ocean Energy Management insists sector's future bright despite challenges ranging from permitting to whale strandings

By **Tim Ferry**

The new US offshore wind regulatory chief Elizabeth Klein is “aggressively optimistic” about sector development despite recent headwinds, saying she is “very focused” on making the permitting process more efficient to achieve the national **30GW by 2030 target**.

“The administration has sent a strong signal about its support for renewable energy and certainly for offshore renewable energy,” she told *Recharge*, in one of her first interviews since taking over as director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) on 10 January.

Klein said the administration feels a sense of urgency to address the climate crisis and views offshore wind development as a “key tool to move towards sustainable, cleaner, more secure energy sources”.

She replaced Amanda Lefton who over two years presided over permitting of the nation’s initial two commercial scale projects, **Vineyard Wind 1** and **South Fork**, as well as high-profile lease auctions in California, the Carolinas, and the record-setting New York Bight that together raised over \$5bn.

Headwinds

Despite progress, the industry is facing turbulence amid **a rash of whale strandings** along Mid-Atlantic and Northeast coasts blamed on the sector as well as 40-year high inflation and supply chain disruptions that have rendered **some projects in Massachusetts unfinanceable**, according to their owners.

Environmentalists have joined with fisheries advocates, coastal residents and others in calling for a **general moratorium on the industry** until it can be definitively proven that survey activities by developers are not the root cause of the strandings.

Klein said there is no data suggesting that the recent whale beachings have any connection specifically to offshore wind activities but acknowledged that “as projects become more real in certain places, there are communities that have legitimate questions about what this means for impacts to ocean resources” and existing ocean users.

“Getting some of these projects, approved and constructed, I think will ameliorate a lot of the concerns that folks have,” she said, adding that overcoming public concerns will entail “making sure that we're providing adequate information”.

“When provided with accurate, data driven information, facts and science, we know that communities tend to respond in a favourable way.”

“You can be concerned about something but also understand that the scope of the risk is such that the development activity is still worth moving forward,” she added.

Among her first moves as director will be to oversee the coming offshore wind lease sale in two **wind energy areas (WEAs) in the Gulf of Mexico**, the fourth by the Biden administration.

She is also tasked with meeting the administration’s aggressive 2025 deadline for final review of 16 projects and carrying forward seven lease sales. Over the next two years, BOEM plans on holding auctions in the **Central Atlantic**, off the coast of **Oregon**, and in the **Gulf of Maine**.

Smart from the Start

A long-term Department of Interior (Dol) employee who worked in the administration of Barack Obama as the regulatory framework for the industry was set up, Klein said “I had a pretty good sort of 101 of the programme and how it began.”

Offshore wind development was initially authorised by the Energy Policy Act of 2005 but got its boost from a regulatory standpoint in 2011, with the establishment of the ‘Smart from the Start policy’.

Smart from the Start policy entails “the government proactively taking a role in identifying places that seem well suited for in this case offshore wind development” while avoiding stakeholder conflicts, Klein explained.

While the policy has enabled the leasing of hundreds of thousands of acres of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS), it is also at the heart of **multiple lawsuits facing the federal government** regarding its approval of Vineyard Wind 1 because it allows leases to be sold before undergoing comprehensive environmental reviews.

Opposite to standard practice for offshore oil & gas lease sales, offshore wind leases only face a full environmental impact statement upon submission of construction and operations plan by a developer.

Permitting delays

While multiple stakeholders are pushing for an industry wide slowdown, **lengthy permitting timelines** of up to a decade are among the industry’s biggest headache.

Eliminating redundancies in the process is key, said Klein, noting that along with BOEM multiple agencies are involved in environmental reviews, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Environment Protection Agency, and the US Army Corps of Engineers.

The federal government is working to make sure “there's one environmental review done that can satisfy the needs of multiple action agencies”, she said.

Another is rebuilding capacity in human resources, as the rate of workers quitting the federal government increased by nearly a quarter since the pandemic began.

“There have been efforts to really build that capacity back up and make sure that there are enough people to do the work,” she said.

To increase the bureau's capacity and streamline permitting, Biden’s 2024 budget seeks to raise BOEM’s renewable energy budget by 25%, to \$64.5m, while providing an additional \$60m to partner agency NOAA “to expand offshore wind permitting activities”, according to a White House press release.

The National Marine Fisheries Service under NOAA monitors coastal environments and plays a critical role in the permitting process.

Finally, she looks to the industry to ensure that the government has timely and sufficient information early to evaluate projects to make “the whole process considerably smoother,” she said.