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Morro Bay mayor: We must go big on offshore wind. The Central Coast can lead the way

This photo from Aug. 15, 2016, shows offshore wind turbines near Block Island, Rhode Island. MICHAEL DWYER AP



BY JOHN HEADING

Rising energy prices along with a cascade of climate impacts due to continued fossil fuel emissions need immediate action. California is the world's fifth largest economy — we can and must do better. It's time to take action and accelerate the state's transition to a 100% clean energy economy. Responsible offshore wind development will be key to getting us there.

Recently, Gov. Gavin Newsom sent a letter to the California Air Resources Board saying the state needs to “up its game.” He called for an end to new gas-fired power plants, a push for offshore wind generation and the construction of millions of climate-friendly homes. Now Newsom must take the next step and accelerate California's climate goals, stop any new oil and gas well permitting and put more resources into offshore wind.

Just imagine a future where offshore floating wind turbines replace all coastal fossil fuel drilling rigs. That hope is within our reach. It started the day the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management released its proposed sale notice for wind energy area zones in California. Lease areas off Morro Bay offer development locations 20 miles offshore from San Luis Obispo County. At that distance, the floating turbines will be indistinguishable on the horizon. Along with Humboldt's development, 4.5 gigawatts (GW) of clean power will be generated for 1.6 million homes, yet that amount of energy production pales in comparison to our state's potential.

According to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, California has up to 200 GW of offshore wind potential. A report by Environment America and Frontier Group states California could provide 157 percent of 2019's annual electricity usage with offshore wind. But state law, AB 525, only requires at least 3 GW commitments of offshore wind capacity by 2030 and up to 20 GW by 2050. With build-outs taking six years, we should be preparing now for more floating offshore wind farms.

We must have more areas designated and the build-out process must be accelerated. The state should “up its game” to at least 5 GW by 2030. Morro Bay and the Central Coast have a historic opportunity to become an energy hub that will help California reach its clean energy and climate goals while bolstering our economy with the West Coast's first floating offshore wind farms that will generate power day and night.

Our coast is ideal for deep-water floating turbines. We have been working with our fisheries and tribal members to protect cultural and environmental resources and ensure equity and equality. We can model how offshore wind projects can be developed to maximize the benefits for affected communities.

Once operational, these powerhouses will provide a renewable energy resource for California and create much-needed jobs, attract public and private investments and bring long-term economic development opportunities starting later this year. Offshore wind development has wide support among labor unions, industry, and environmental groups. Thousands of shovel-ready union jobs will be created, as well as port revitalization, which alone can add up to 6,000 local, full-time equivalent jobs per port right away, according to a report from Brightline Defense. And there will be apprenticeship training programs for career pathways in the highly paid trades for workers. These opportunities will also prepare the state's workforce to build, operate and maintain a 100% clean energy electricity grid.

With offshore wind and other clean energy resources, California will be more secure in the face of another fossil fuel-induced energy crisis. Offshore wind will make offshore oil drilling obsolete as this antiquated technology is no longer viable. Our children should not have to worry about oil spills, rolling blackouts, heat waves, droughts and fires caused by our overconsumption of fossil fuels. We must move away from fossil fuels to a clean energy economy by accelerating offshore wind energy.

On Aug. 10, the California Energy Commission will vote to lead the nation in setting ambitious offshore wind goals. The CEC staff report recommends going beyond the targets set by AB 525 by proposing 3-5 GW by 2030 and 25 GW by 2045, setting up California to get 25% of its energy resources from offshore wind by midcentury, enough to power 6.76 million homes. The time is now to go big on offshore wind, and I strongly encourage the commission to adopt these goals to deliver on jobs, climate, energy resiliency and clean air.

John Heading is the mayor of Morro Bay.