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Massive Morro Bay offshore wind farm proposal starts environmental review. What's next?

By Mackenzie Shuman

The federal government has officially designated a massive area for floating offshore wind turbines to potentially be built in the Pacific Ocean off California's Central Coast, according to an announcement on Friday. The announcement means the federal government can begin the next phase in the process: an environmental review.

The Morro Bay wind energy area — located about 20 miles off the coast of San Simeon and Cambria — is slated to encompass 376 square miles of the Pacific Ocean, or about 240,898 acres, according to the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM). That's a decrease from the 399 square miles proposed in May by Biden administration officials — but still larger than the 311-square-mile area discussed in 2018. The wind energy area includes the west extension that was proposed in July.

BOEM decided to not include the east extension in its official area designation "based on the stakeholder identification of various resource conditions or use conflicts, primarily including tribal concerns and potential commercial fishing, avian and visual impacts," according to a 41-page memo detailing the agency's decision released on Friday.

The 376-square-mile wind energy area could provide about 2.9 gigawatts of electricity at peak production, according to BOEM. That's down slightly from the 3 gigawatts that could have been generated from the 399-square-mile project proposed in May.

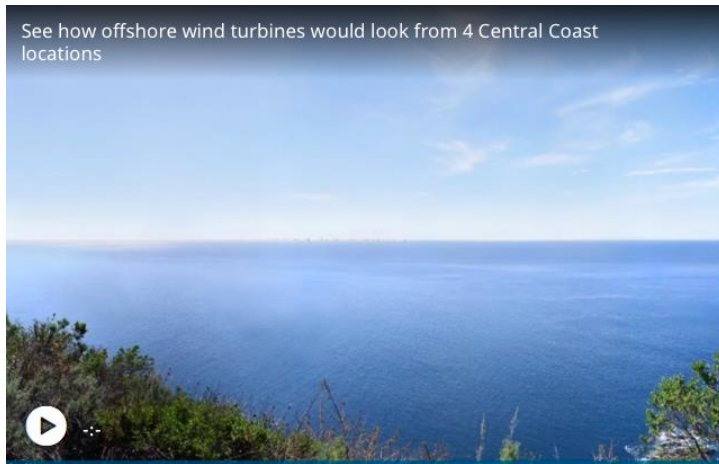
"Offshore wind presents a significant opportunity for California and our nation as we transition to clean, renewable energy. Today's announcement represents significant progress towards that future," BOEM Director Amanda Lefton said in a statement Friday. "As the process continues, BOEM is committed to environmental reviews, which are critical for a strong resource management program, and to robust public engagement."

The newly-designated 376-square-mile area in which floating offshore wind turbines may be developed, according to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management. Courtesy of BOEM

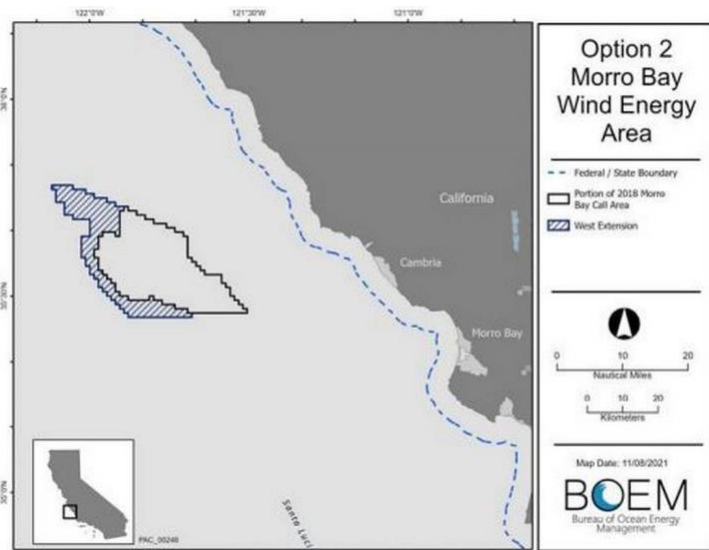
Designation of the wind energy area kicks off the next step in the long procedure before wind turbines may be seen floating off San Luis Obispo County shores.

The environmental assessment process begins Friday for the proposed offshore wind energy farm. BOEM initially identified some potential environmental impacts in deciding where the development would be located. However, the official environmental assessment — mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act — will include further research and opportunities for public comment.

Those impacts included national security and Department of Defense activities, as well as fishing activities, vessel navigation, viewshed, marine mammals, sea turtles, birds and bats, according to the 41-page memo. Based on those initial assessments, BOEM settled on the 376-square-mile area instead of the 399-square-mile area. The agency said in the memo that some of the impacts it identified depend on project specifics such as the number of wind turbines built in the area, their size, spacing and configuration.



BOEM



Additionally, BOEM noted that the wind energy area is next to the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, which the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration moved into the designation phase on Tuesday.

“Identification of the Morro Bay WEA (wind energy area) underscores BOEM’s commitment to an all of government approach to achieve the Biden-Harris administration goal to deploy 30 GW of offshore wind by 2030 and conserving and restoring ocean and coastal habitats,” BOEM said. “The Morro Bay WEA is adjacent to the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary along California’s Central Coast. Advancing both wind energy development and the sanctuary designation process in the area demonstrates the Biden-Harris Administration’s commitments to these important and complementary goals.”

NOAA is advancing a marine sanctuary area that does not overlap with the proposed wind energy area, despite the two overlapping in the originally nominated marine sanctuary map.

A map of the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary.
Courtesy of NOAA

The beginning of BOEM’s environmental assessment for the Morro Bay wind energy area means the public will have the opportunity to weigh in. Public comments about environmental concerns such as potential biological, archaeological and geological impacts can be submitted to BOEM through the Federal Register from Friday to Jan. 11, 2022.

Two public meetings will be held during that time. Those are yet to be scheduled. The environmental review process is expected to conclude in mid 2022. During that time, BOEM will publish leasing notices for companies interested in leasing the rights to develop floating offshore wind turbines in the Morro Bay wind energy area.

BOEM has received interest from dozens of energy companies that want to develop the Morro Bay wind energy area. Official nominations include Castle Wind LLC, Avangrid Renewables LLC, Equinor Wind US LLC, Central California Offshore Wind LLC. Other companies, such as Shell Renewables and Energy Solutions LLC, and bp America Inc., have expressed interest in the area as well.

The next step is a lease sale auction, expected to happen in the fall of 2022. Once a lease or multiple leases are issued, several years of site assessment surveys and pre-construction plans will take place.

HOW TO COMMENT ON PROPOSED MORRO BAY WIND ENERGY PROJECT

Here are some ways you can comment on the potential environmental impacts of the proposed offshore Morro Bay wind energy development. You can use the federal commenting system web portal, Regulations.gov. Search for Docket No. BOEM-2021-0044. Click on the blue “Comment” button in the upper left-hand corner of the page. Enter your information and comment, then click “Submit Comment.”

You can also comment in written form, delivered by hand or by traditional mail. Enclose your comment in an envelope labeled “Scoping on Morro Bay Wind Energy Area Environmental Assessment” and addressed to the Office of the Environment, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, 760 Paseo Camarillo, Camarillo, California 93010.

In addition, you can share your thoughts during a BOEM virtual scoping meeting to be held within the public comment period. BOEM does not consider anonymous comments. Please include your name and address as part of your submittal.

All comments submitted will be made part of the public record and will be posted publicly without change. Comments must be sent by or postmarked no later than 11:59 PM on Jan. 11, 2022.

PANEL EVENT TO DISCUSS OFFSHORE WIND ON CENTRAL COAST

The Tribune will host a virtual informational panel event on Nov. 19 to discuss the potential offshore wind energy development coming to the Central Coast. The panelists will be Central Coast Congressman Salud Carbajal, BOEM Pacific regional director Doug Boren, California Energy Commissioner Karen Douglas, REACH CEO Melissa James and Cal Poly associate professor Ben Ruttenberg, director of the Center for Coastal Marine Sciences.

For more information about the panel event, including how to RSVP, go to bit.ly/TribOffshoreWind.

