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## Maryland coast opened to offshore wind development

### More than 300 turbines could be erected in phases

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

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The federal government on Monday invited bids from wind power developers to place turbines off Maryland's coast, taking the first step toward what could be the nation's largest offshore commercial wind project to date.

The Department of Interior identified a 207 nautical-square-mile area off the state's 31-mile coast for possible leasing, largely accepting the recommendations of a state task force that has been studying offshore wind prospects since early this year. The turbines nearest to shore could be placed 10 nautical miles off Ocean City and 20 nautical miles off Assateague National Seashore.

The announcement by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement was hailed by Gov. Martin O'Malley, who has made developing offshore wind a centerpiece of his administration's energy policy. His administration has proposed developing one gigawatt of electricity-generating capacity off Maryland's coast, erecting more than 300 commercial turbines in phases.

O'Malley issued a statement calling the federal move "another step forward for Maryland's new economy." His administration has said developing one gigawatt of power offshore could support 4,000 manufacturing and construction jobs, plus 800 permanent jobs to operate and maintain the turbines and related infrastructure.

A formal request for expressions of interest from potential wind power developers is to be published in the Federal Register on Tuesday.

The announcement makes Maryland the second state to get this far in the federal process of leasing the Outer Continental Shelf off its 31-mile coast for wind development. The bureau issued a similar request for putting wind turbines off Delaware's southern coast earlier this year.

NRG Bluewater Wind has proposed erecting 450 megawatts' worth of electrical generation off Delaware, with the closest turbines 12 nautical miles (more than 13 highway miles) off Rehoboth. The 420-megawatt Cape Wind project in Massachusetts' Nantucket Sound was the first offshore development to win federal approval under a different process.

The O'Malley administration has pushed offshore wind as the main way to achieve the state's goal of getting 20 percent of Maryland's electricity needs from renewable power by 2022.

The announcement drew praise from those environmentalists who have long advocated renewable energy to reduce climate-warming emissions from coal-burning power plants. "The sooner we get off coal the better," said Kathy Phillips, head of the Assateague Coastal Trust, which has endorsed developing wind off Maryland's coast, as long as it's done to minimize environmental impacts.

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## Years away

It still could be years before any turbines go up off Maryland's coast. Environmental and other reviews could take up to two years, and potential conflicts addressed, such as impacts of turbines on shipping, on undersea habitat and on birds migrating offshore.

The announcement caps nearly two years of planning by the state. The Department of Natural Resources worked with the Nature Conservancy, a Washington-based conservation group, to map the waters off the state's coast and to identify areas where turbines or transmission cables might disrupt sensitive undersea habitat or over-water migration routes for birds. To avoid such areas, the state's task force dropped six potential leasing blocs, each measuring 9 square miles.

Several blocks also have been ruled out to accommodate concerns from the Department of Defense that turbines might interfere with flights and radar operations at Patuxent Naval Air Station and at NASA's Wallops Island flight facility on the Virginia Eastern Shore. The Pentagon called for excluding as many as one-third of the leasing blocks originally proposed, and said it had "site specific stipulations" for more than half.

"We've got some concerns, but we're confident it's workable," said Ian Hines, spokesman for the Maryland Energy Administration. Experts believe many concerns about turbines interfering with air traffic or radar can be resolved by placing navigation lights on towers or sensors on turbine blades so their movement can be distinguished from other objects on radar screens.

A University of Maryland study last month pointed to potential turbine interference with military radar as a significant hurdle to be overcome, but not necessarily an insurmountable one. It also stressed that an inadequate transmission-line network on Maryland's Eastern Shore could raise the cost of transporting electricity produced offshore. But a Google-led investment group recently announced its interest in building transmission capability along the eastern seaboard.

Other reductions in the leasing area are likely to accommodate commercial shipping in the Delaware Bay. A shipping "exclusion zone" has been mapped out on the edge of Delaware's proposed offshore wind area, but that corridor ends at the northern boundary of the Maryland wind area.

Once potential developers have had a chance to register their interest, the federal government will have to sort out any competing bids, then begin evaluating the proposed projects more carefully for potential environmental impacts and for the strength of the winds in those locations.

Each project would be reviewed under the National Environmental Policy Act, said Andrew Gohn, wind energy expert for the state energy office. That process could take up to two years, by some estimates.

"We want to develop as fast as possible, but want to develop in a responsible way," he said.

## Can we see it?

Large commercial offshore wind turbines have generated concerns about their visual impact on tourist-dependent beach communities. State energy spokesman Ian Hines said turbines built 10 nautical miles from shore likely would appear "fingernail-size" from Ocean City's boardwalk on clear, cool days. But the machines would be virtually invisible at that distance in peak summer tourism months, he contended, when humid air makes the horizon hazy.

Nationally, the wind industry, both offshore and land-based, has hit a slowdown, with additions of new electric generating capacity falling earlier this year to its slowest pace since 2007, according to a recent announcement by the American Wind Energy Association.

Gohn acknowledged there has been a "lull" in turbine construction. He attributed it to the recession and low prices for natural gas, but added he believed the slowdown will be short-lived.

"Over the long term, hedging with renewables is still the best strategy for avoiding price shocks from volatile fuel supplies," Gohn said.

When the state on its own publicly solicited expressions of interest in its offshore waters about a year ago, six wind developers and three transmission companies responded, Gohn noted.

NRG Bluewater Wind has previously expressed interest in placing turbines off Maryland's coast.

"We're thrilled," said Peter D. Mandelstam, president and founder of Bluewater Wind. He said the Maryland announcement coming on the heels of the Delaware offering indicates to the industry and potential investors that both state and federal governments are serious about developing offshore wind.

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*An earlier version misstated the size of the area off Maryland's coast that can be leased for wind energy development. It is approximately 207 nautical square miles. The Sun regrets the error.*

## Next steps

**Nov. 9** "Request for interest" to be published in Federal Register, inviting developers to submit proposals and the public to comment on any environmental or other concerns.

**Jan. 4** (60 days later) Deadline for potential developers to respond and for public to comment.

**After Jan. 4** – Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement reviews developer interest and invites more-detailed proposals. If competing bids, agency goes through a months-long, detailed evaluation process.

Environmental reviews would be made before any leases are finalized — a process that could take up to two years.

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