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Offshore Wind Push Gains Momentum in California

Lawmakers clear a proposal intended to jumpstart floating wind farms off the coast, saying the technology could prop the state's buckling power grid and create more than 10,000 new jobs.

[NICK CAHILL](#) / July 13, 2021



Fields not occupied by farms or houses near Brannan Island on California's Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta are increasingly used for wind farms. In 2020, wind energy accounted for more than 13,000 gigawatt-hours or a little more than 7% of the energy produced in the Golden State. (Courthouse News photo / Chris Marshall)

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (CN) — Caught again in an energy crisis and facing another summer of rolling blackouts, California lawmakers are trolling the coast for a new power source.

With renewed interest in offshore wind and financial support en route from the federal government, a state Senate committee on Tuesday advanced legislation that would help spur an armada of floating wind farms off California's coast.

Proponents said the state can't afford to miss out on a golden opportunity to buffer its increasingly strained electrical supply and advance its ambitious goal of a wholly green grid.

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“After a year of heatwaves, wildfires, rolling blackouts and the loss of over 1 million jobs, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity just 20-30 miles off our coast to address climate change and put people back to work,” said [Assembly Bill 525](#) author David Chiu.

Tuesday’s vote by the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee comes as the state is once again crossing its fingers and urging residents to conserve power this summer.

Over the last several days the managers of California’s grid have issued “Flex Alerts,” citing a heatwave in addition to a massive wildfire in the Pacific Northwest that is impacting the state’s transmission lines. Officials said the fire over the weekend zapped enough energy from the grid to supply over 2 million homes. Despite the challenges, no utilities were forced to cut off power like they did on several occasions in 2020.

Chiu, D-San Francisco, and a collection of construction unions and environmental groups are also looking to take advantage of the Biden administration’s promise to shift the country from oil and coal. In recent weeks, federal officials have approved new offshore wind projects in [places like Massachusetts](#) and are also exploring opportunities in California and the [Gulf of Mexico](#).

Under Chiu’s proposal, state regulators would be tasked with developing a comprehensive plan for clearing regulatory hurdles and building the necessary infrastructure to develop an offshore wind industry off the Pacific Ocean. Furthermore, the bill directs the California Energy Commission to coordinate with the energy industry and labor groups to find ways to avoid negative impacts

on coastal and marine ecosystems.

The bipartisan proposal sailed through the Assembly by a 71-6 margin in the spring and advanced Tuesday in unanimous fashion. The proposal, which has no official opposition listed in its committee analysis, must now clear a fiscal committee before a final vote in the state Senate.

Along with securing a reliable new source of clean energy, an offshore wind boom could create thousands of new jobs.

Jeremy Smith, of the State Building and Construction Trade Council, testified the union's members are ready and capable to usher in the offshore wind era.

"Our hands-on knowledge of power production in California makes us keenly aware of the strains on our existing grid and the need to add more forms of energy to it," said Smith. "Assemblymember Chiu is rightfully focused on increasing power production by harnessing California's infinite wind resources."

According to Chiu, offshore wind projects could contribute 14,000 "good-paying jobs" and save ratepayers up to \$1 billion by 2040. Other supporters include Environment California, California Association of Port Authorities, Sierra Club California and The Nature Conservancy.

For decades California has been a key producer of wind energy, generating nearly 6,000 megawatts (MW) in 2019 — the fifth most of any state. But unlike some of the other major producers on the East Coast, its wind energy haul is wholly land-based.

Though California has over 800 miles of steep coastline, traditional offshore wind technologies aren't feasible due to the immense depths of the Pacific Ocean. The solution, proponents say, is moving away from fixed-bottom turbines in favor of an army of floating ones.

The floating option would involve cabling or mooring the turbines to an underwater platform hundreds of feet underwater and allow generation to occur above submarine basins such as the Monterey Canyon.

So far the feds and state are focusing off the rocky Central California coastline for the first projects. Last May, the Biden administration said it will jumpstart

the regulatory process and schedule lease sales with the private sector throughout a nearly 400-square-mile stretch near Morro Bay.

Other future wind farms could be developed near Humboldt County while demonstration projects are being considered near Vandenberg Air Force Base in Santa Barbara County.

With California scheduled to shutter its last remaining nuclear power plant in 2025 and already struggling to keep the lights on during heatwaves, committee members said it was critical to consider all new forms of energy.

“We’re going to have to start to get creative about finding balance in our system,” said state Sen. Henry Stern, D-Los Angeles. “We have to go fast though; the stakes are high and the turbines are large.”

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