Column: Who really benefits from offshore wind farm proposal

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Tim Palmer Pilot Guest Column October 17, 2023

A deadline of Oct.16 has been set for public comments on the most momentous plan ever considered for waters of our Oregon Coast.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), whose job has historically been to lease the seafloor to oil companies, has identified 219,568 acres of ocean for hundreds of floating wind-power generators, 18-32 miles offshore.

Turbines would be tethered by plastic ropes to the seafloor, down to 4,000 feet, while above the waves the generators would tower taller than the Washington Monument. High-voltage would be dispatched by miles-long underwater cables of fiber, lead, and copper to substations, then hundreds of miles inland through undefined transmission corridors. Ships needed for this work have not even been built. Ports would be dredged, estuaries channeled, fishing waters reduced, powerlines strung, support facilities assembled at unfathomed expense and an equally enormous consumption of energy.

We might first want to examine the record of success for this technology. But it's just being invented—only one floating turbine in the U.S. What about the wind itself? It's strong, in fact, frequently screaming at hurricane force in winter, difficult-to-impossible for offshore maintenance, months on end. The power has to be sold, so, to whom? Big consumers are nowhere nearby—just look at a nationwide night-sky photo for a quick take on where power is most-used. How will industrial wind facilities affect the coast's cultural backbone of commercial fishing or the economic fundament of tourism?

Doing their homework, fishermen have emerged as staunch opponents of industrializing offshore wind. Can we forecast harm to birds, which by many millions migrate through offshore waters? Lists of vulnerable wildlife range from albatross to albacore, whiting to whales. Yet ecosystem damage will be evaluated almost last in BOEM's 12-year timeline, long after commitments have hardened to spend, build, sacrifice.

How will the public be assured that cloud-high towers and deep-sea cables will be removed after abandonment by corporations that can disappear from legal registry far easier than would the megalithic hardware left behind for collisions by everything from boats to endangered birds? For a peek at this future, look no further than the disappeared gas companies whose abandoned wells leak methane in climate-changing quantity. Will buildout affect wind-driven upwellings of nutrient-laden water that underpin keystone marine

resources? No one knows. A domino game awaits with cascading threats counteracting any reduction in global warming that wind generation here is intended to curb. Speculating on benefits but lacking forecasts of costs, BOEM plunges ahead.

Consider—perhaps most important—that floating deep-water wind is the least viable among renewable energy options. Let me say this another way: any investment here means less investment in alternatives that promise far more renewable power at far less cost. To go green, why not get the biggest bang for the buck?

Other alternatives for sustainable electricity are readily available, thoroughly vetted, officially approved, efficiently deployable, and unquestionably profitable without the need to challenge America's stormiest seas. Wind power off Oregon's coast would cost 1.7 times more than comparable generation by windmills built into the seafloor, as they are along shallower coastlines. Deployment here will cost four times that of land-based wind. Floating turbines cost six times the tab for solar power anywhere with sunshine; picture rooftops, Walmart on down. Plus, in the past two years the costs of deep-water wind have risen disproportionately to other energy sources.

Even if BOEM lacks caution, why would any entrepreneur or corporate board ante-up at a game so elementally rigged against the gambler? Suspects, here, are federal subsidies and investor safeguards that lure speculators with taxpayers swallowing the risks. Undermining any justifications imagined, energy generated in the ocean here is farther from and less accessible to major electric consumers than it is along any other American coastline but Alaska's.

BOEM's proposal is a dangerously damaging waste of money and a tragic squander of time —not just years but precious decades as our atmosphere continues to warm. We must go renewable, but compared to other options, wind generation here poses the worst threats to the environment, the greatest costs to deploy, and the longest time to come on-line.

Any prudent investor would follow the money, which leads in many directions but not to the coast of Oregon.

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