

By [Mike Lawrence](#)[Print Page](#)

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Study: Offshore wind's impacts on fisheries unclear; federal report calls for more research

NEW BEDFORD — Advocates for regional fishing industries and marine life are concerned about the impacts of offshore wind turbines as deep-pocketed, experienced developers eye construction in ocean waters south of Martha's Vineyard.

The offshore wind industry has been touted as a key piece of New Bedford's economic future, but advocates' concerns are reflected in a federal report that says little is known about how turbines could affect fish populations.

"Potential impacts of offshore wind energy development on fisheries resources are not well understood, both here in the U.S. and abroad," states a study released in July by the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), citing a "comprehensive" review of related literature.

"The site-specific project data needed to evaluate the potential impacts on fisheries resources in these (wind energy areas) is lacking, resulting in uncertainty and speculation," the study also states.

BOEM's new committee on ocean energy management and the environment will hold its first meeting next week, in Washington, D.C. The group of respected scientists from across the nation — none from SouthCoast — will help guide BOEM's stewardship of offshore energy resources, a BOEM news release says.

The group could help fill the void of information cited by the BOEM study over the summer.

The Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation, part of the project team behind the study, called attention to the findings in mid-November. That call came as representatives of three companies — Rhode Island-based Deepwater Wind, New Jersey-based OffshoreMW and Denmark-based DONG Energy — spoke at the State House in Boston and other locations, including New Bedford, about their plans to develop large-scale turbine farms in leased federal waters south of Martha's Vineyard and off Rhode Island.

The companies are potential future competitors, but are making a unified pitch for offshore wind power purchase requirements to be included in a state energy bill that legislators and Gov. Charlie Baker could adopt next year.

Matthew Morrissey, executive director of the trade association Offshore Wind: Massachusetts, said the offshore wind and commercial fishing industries can coexist in the commonwealth.

"The offshore wind industry around the world has long sought, and succeeded to establish, productive partnerships with ocean stakeholders — and the fishing industry is first among them," Morrissey said.

Brian Rothschild, professor emeritus of marine biology at UMass Dartmouth's School for Marine Science and Technology (SMAST), said this week, though, that the potential for large-scale offshore wind development in the region raises several questions for commercial fishing.

"The first issue is the physical issue — just the fact that these installations could overlap places where commercial fishing (occurs)," Rothschild said. "The second issue is what the installations do to the biology. There's a running argument in the Gulf of Mexico, where they have oil rigs instead of wind turbines, as to whether they increase or decrease ocean productivity."

The BOEM study listed a range of potential marine life questions that could arise in coming months, as offshore wind discussions continue to unfold.

"Previous studies indicate the factors that may impact species in these wind energy areas include: habitat alteration, noise and vibration, electromagnetic fields, scouring and sedimentation, reef effects, introduction of invasive species, lighting effects, ecosystem changes...and pollution from accidents or structural damage," the study states.

State Rep. Patricia Haddad, D-Somerset, is sponsoring energy legislation that includes wind power purchase requirements intended to boost turbine development. Thursday at UMass Dartmouth's GAEA Climate Summit, she said turbine stanchions can attract marine life when installed on the sea floor.

"It becomes like a reefing effect," she said.

Kevin Stokesbury, chairman of SMAST's Fisheries Oceanography Department, said discussions are under way with BOEM and representatives of the turbine developers about potential impacts to lobster and quahog fisheries, migratory fish movements and more.

"The dialogue is starting, but I still know that there's quite a concern in the fishing industry about it," Stokesbury said.

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