Wind Power: It “Blowed Up Good”

Wind energy *is* all it’s blown up to be.

States like Texas and Oklahoma know wind to be a viable and powerful source of renewable energy, and have been tapping into it on their plains and prairies for decades.

Rhode Island, being a bit short on plains and prairies inventory, took the best route available — looking to the ocean for the Ocean State.

The state recognized that ocean winds had sufficient power to produce usable amounts of wind energy in the early 2000s, and sought to take advantage of that untapped asset. The action taken on that potential valuable resource has resulted in The Biggest Little becoming the first state in the nation to develop an offshore wind energy farm in the Atlantic Ocean in the form of a pilot project by Deepwater Wind of five wind energy turbines off the shore of Block Island, which are now up and running and beginning to generate electricity for Rhode Island as a whole and where it was mostly badly needed, on The Block.

(A quick aside here: While the idea of also tapping into wave energy exists, the general rule of thumb in the science and renewable energy communities is “Wind on the east coast, waves on the west coast.” There have been incidents of wave energy projects being proposed off the shores of Rhode Island, but it simply isn’t financially viable at this point, and at least one of the wave energy proposals appeared to be a mere stalking horse for developers hoping to acquire offshore leases from the federal government under the guise of harnessing waves, and then quickly shifting over to the more sensible wind alternative.)

If the Deepwater Wind pilot hopefully (and probably, it says here) succeeds, they have plans, and federal and state permission, to develop a 100+ wind turbine farm farther offshore to the northeast of the current project. And as technology races ahead on offshore wind generation, this will inevitably lead to more reasonable pricing, which is currently at 24.4 cents per kilowatt hour for the pilot project, falling between higher-priced solar and above fossil fuels, but meeting the legal requirement of being a “commercially reasonable” price charged through the agreement between Deepwater and National Grid, which controls Rhode Island’s electricity grid.

For years, all the talk in New England had been about the Cape Wind project proposed for the waters off the coast of Massachusetts. Unfortunately for the developers, they made the mistake of identifying a site that would have been visible from the Kennedy compound in Hyannis, and we certainly couldn’t have any of those unsightly wind turbines disturbing the water views of America’s royal family, now could we? A combination of Kennedy political and media influence, opposition with backdoor funding by the fossil fuel power bloc, a stream of bullshit challenges on everything from aesthetics to the killing of sea birds, and a regulatory and stakeholder evaluation process that they could not have made more of a hash of if they tried, has resulted in Cape Wind becoming a lesson in what not to do. So enter Rhode Island, which can now claim rights to “first in the nation” status to something that does not involve mob hits or politicians in prison.

Believe it or not, Little Rhody did it the right way from start to finish, and the process they used became a national model for offshore wind energy exploration. With renewable energy just starting to roar publicly, an Ocean Special Area Management Plan, to be headed by the state Coastal Resources Management Council and abetted by the best minds and science at predominantly the University of Rhode Island, was authorized to try to back up the determination by the Rhode Island Office of Energy Resources in 2007 that investment in offshore wind farms would be necessary to achieve then-Governor Donald Carcieri's ambitious mandate that offshore wind resources should provide 15% of the state's electrical power by 2020.

Right now, New England is at the point where about half its energy is generated by natural gas; new and old renewable energy sources at about 20%; and the rest generated by a mix of sources that range from solar, oil and coal, and even some nuclear energy from the Seabrook (NH) and Millstone (CT) plants. As renewables such as wind energy gain traction, the use of fossil-fueled sources will decrease over time, welcome news to those who actually believe in climate change.

Jerry Elmer, senior attorney at Conservation Law Foundation's Rhode Island office, who studies energy issues harder than you ever cracked a book in school, says that wind energy is a "great idea" and "certainly an integral part of the future." This has great import as Rhode Island looks to the future of the use of renewable sources of energy as part of our energy resources. This efficient use of renewables will also help put a crimp in the plans for fossil-based energy sources, such as the bitterly contested Invenergy power plant being proposed for Burrillville, against which Elmer and CLF have been leading the charge locally.

If there is one nuanced fear that exists about renewables, it is that their success may drive out traditional sources before the renewables can completely handle the load. But CLF argues that the costs for building new renewable energy resources is coming down sharply as the industry matures and realizes economies of scale, and the actual build-out of renewables is happening faster than most people predicted.

So get to the point, already. Yes, wind energy is viable, renewable and a damn smart decision when you're looking at those winds blowing almost full-time offshore without punching a clock. And you're not getting unfairly hammered in the wallet just to be on the right side of the angels on climate change and able to wear your "Green" badge with pride. We are just being smart by maximizing a gift from Mother Nature in our own front yard. Wind energy, offshore or on, is a long-term win-win, and when those other eastern coastal states start putting up offshore wind turbines faster than a Trump hotel or casino can go under, take a little bit of pride in telling folks, "Hey, we showed you how to do it right, folks."

– Chip Young is a communications strategy consultant and president of the board of directors of ecoRI News. He also proudly worked on the Ocean Special Area Management Project.