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Environmental studies so far have found little potential impact from a proposed offshore wind farm in Lake Erie near Cleveland.

Draft environmental report for Lake Erie offshore wind project is promising

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A draft Department of Energy report shows mainly minor or negligible short-term impacts from a plan to construct and operate six wind turbines approximately eight miles offshore of Cleveland.

“Having a draft environmental assessment the public can comment on is a huge milestone,” said Lorry Wagner, president of LEEDCo, the Lake Erie Energy Development Corporation, at an informational open house in Lakewood, Ohio, on September 6. The report’s review of potential environmental impacts is a requirement under the National Environmental Policy Act.

“The draft Environmental Assessment (EA) presents a detailed analysis of the potential impacts of the proposed demonstration offshore wind project,” explained Roak Parker of DOE’s NEPA office. Feedback from the public and other state and federal agencies on the draft “will make the final EA more robust,” Parker added, although he declined to speculate on that outcome before review of the comments.

Water, wildlife and more

Once built, Project Icebreaker should produce about 20.7 megawatts of electricity, which is enough for about 7,000 homes. Electricity from the line of six turbines will flow through a cable under the lake bed to a Cleveland Public Power substation.

Although Project Icebreaker is just six turbines, its goal is not just to produce some electricity, but to demonstrate the feasibility of offshore wind power in Lake Erie. Ultimately, proponents hope lake-based wind could provide a significant amount of electricity, particularly in Lake Erie’s central and eastern basins. Construction of new land-based wind farms in Ohio has been largely stymied by a 2014 law that tripled the previous property line setbacks.

Materials for the DOE’s draft environmental assessment of the project include a 176-page draft report, plus hundreds of pages of support in 25 appendices. Among other things, the materials consider potential impacts on the lake’s physical resources, water quality, fish and wildlife, health and safety, air quality, climate change, lake use, traffic, noise, and cultural and aesthetic values.

The draft’s overall conclusions are “good news” for the project’s prospects, said LEEDCo Director of Sustainable Development Beth Nagusky. Most impacts described in the draft report are negligible or minor, she noted, and are primarily short-term effects linked to construction. The few long-term effects are noted as “minor” in DOE’s summary of potential impacts.

For birds and bats, for example, more detailed appendices indicate that species generally stay close to the shoreline, and few were observed in the project area during surveys. Last year ornithologist Caleb Gordon of Western Ecosystems Technology, Inc., who worked on those analyses, described the LEEDCo project as “the lowest-risk project I’ve ever worked on.”

Minor impacts for aesthetics and visual resources relate mainly to the fact that turbines will be visible from shore at some locations. Minor impacts on cultural resources include some visible impacts, as well as the potential for shipwrecks or artifacts on the lake floor.

Members of the public have until October 10 to submit comments on the draft, which was prepared by DOE with cooperation from the Coast Guard and the Army Corps of Engineers.

If the final environmental assessment from DOE makes a “finding of no significant impact,” the project will be cleared under the National Environmental Policy Act and can qualify for additional federal funding for its construction.

The Army Corps of Engineers also needs to issue permits under the Clean Water Act before the project can be built. That group should be releasing a companion draft report in the next week or so, noted Joseph Krawczyk of the Corps. “I would anticipate there would be a lot of overlap between the comments we receive and the comments they receive” at DOE, he said.

Timetables for finalization of the DOE and Corps assessments will depend in large part upon the substance of comments received and the work required to address them. That work could be finished late this calendar year or sometime in 2018.

Parallel tracks

In addition to the federal approvals, Project Icebreaker will need a go-ahead from the Ohio Power Siting Board. A local public hearing on the case is scheduled for November 8 at Cleveland City Hall. An adjudicatory hearing will follow in Columbus, starting on November 17.

Citizens have the opportunity to submit comments in that proceeding as well, either by submission to the Ohio Power Siting Board or at the November 8 hearing.

More than 100 comments have already been filed, with supporters so far outnumbering opponents.

Opponents’ comments cite general concerns about migrating birds and other environmental worries. “Wind turbines have proven to be a hazard to migrating birds and the prospect of multiple wind turbines in our lake is obscene,” one Port Clinton resident wrote in August.

Supporters include a variety of citizens who want to bring more clean energy to northeast Ohio, such as several members of Windustrious Cleveland. Dozens of union members and apprentices have also submitted written comments supporting Project Icebreaker.

“This project will open the door to thousands of new jobs and will allow me to stay close to home, raise my family and be part of building an exciting future for Northeast Ohio and the entire Great Lakes region,” wrote several union members of Iron Workers Local 17. Similar statements were made by members of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters Local 435.

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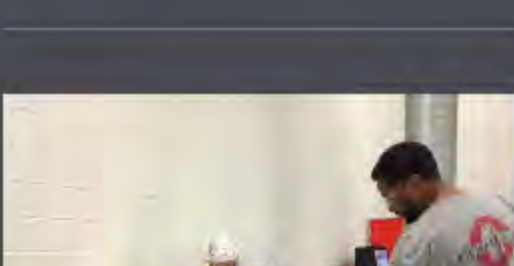
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