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Administration wants to speed up process for windmills in Atlantic

By Darryl Fears

Washington Post Staff Writer Tuesday, November 23, 2010; 9:19 PM

The Obama administration Tuesday announced a plan to speed up development of wind energy by searching the Atlantic Coast for the most desirable places to build windmills rather than wait for developers to propose sites that could hurt the environment or sit in the middle of a shipping lane.

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Under a new initiative called Smart From the Start, the Department of the Interior will identify sites in the Atlantic Outer Continental Shelf with "high wind potential," Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said. Officials said it currently takes up to nine years for an offshore project to get approval to build.

Salazar said the policy change is the result of "a lesson learned" from the grueling fight to place wind turbines in Massachusetts' scenic Nantucket Sound. Opponents have delayed construction of the Cape Wind development even though the government gave it a go-ahead in April.

Interior's new approach will avoid such delays by eliminating "a redundant step in the leasing process," Salazar said, regulating sites before developers select them. Leases could be granted as early as 2011.

Speeding up development "will get us to the point that the president's vision" of creating renewable energy on a wide scale "will become a reality," Salazar said. Only 2 percent of the energy in the United States is produced by wind.

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announcement at Fort McHenry in Baltimore was greeted with applause by Gov. [Martin O'Malley](#) and Rep. John Sarbanes of Maryland, and [Sens. Thomas R. Carper](#) and Christopher Coons of Delaware, all Democrats who stand with the Obama administration on wind energy.

"The hoops we have to jump through take way too long," O'Malley said. He said Maryland is part of a 10-state consortium, including New Jersey and Delaware, that support wind power. "We need to work together as Democrats and Republicans to shorten this process."

Carper said the fight for independence from foreign oil is as important as the fight to maintain our independence from the British that took place nearly two centuries ago at Fort McHenry.

"We need a renewed fight of a different kind today, a fight to be independent of oil . . . fossil fuel and jobs," Carper said. "We also need to make sure as we deploy those windmills . . . that they're not made in China or Taiwan or some place in Europe. We want to make sure they're [built here in America](#)."

Audra Parker, president and chief executive of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, was not impressed.

"We have basically been promoting the notion of zoning the ocean from the start to streamline permitting," she said. "If the Department of the Interior is recognizing that there were issues, it's not too late to correct the Cape Wind mistake."

Parker said Cape Wind's development will desecrate sacred tribal waters and have a negative impact on fisheries. In the long fight against development, "We've raised issues that weren't on the table," Parker said. "Like radar interference to air traffic control navigation."

Nick Loris, a research associate in energy and environment at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said that while the new initiative sounds good, it will still face challenges.

"Wherever you go there will be hurdles to jump over," Loris said. Wind energy development will hurt scenic landscapes and drive up utility costs, he said. "It would take 59 Cape Wind projects to be equivalent to one offshore natural gas project. You're talking about a lot of projects up the coast."

However, he said, "Having a smart permitting process can be beneficial for all energy projects . . . that have been tied up in unnecessary regulation and litigation."

The Sierra Club praised Salazar's announcement, saying "development of offshore wind energy will help move our nation off of the dirty fuels like oil and coal" that damage human health and natural resources.

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