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ENERGY

Can wind farms, fisheries coexist?

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ROCKPORT, Maine — For centuries, New England fishermen have used boats small and large to reap the natural bounties found below the surface of the Gulf of Maine.

But fishermen soon may be forced to share those waters with even larger structures built to capture the gulf's other abundant resource: the wind.

On Saturday, the last day of the annual Maine Fishermen's Forum held last week at the Samoset Resort, dozens of fishermen and others whose livelihoods depend on the sea heard from more than a half-dozen speakers involved in some way in Maine's aggressive and ambitious efforts to turn the nearly always windy gulf into a giant powerhouse.

State officials and energy experts argue that the Gulf of Maine is an ideal place for massive wind farms that would be extremely difficult if not impossible to build on land near people's homes.

But hundreds of massive wind turbine platforms and all of the gear-snagging cables that likely would come with them could affect fish and Maine's commercial fishing industry.

George LaPointe, commissioner of the Maine Department of Marine Resources, said the reality is that the industries are going to have to learn to coexist in areas of the gulf.

"It will take a lot of work," LaPointe said, "but we think it is work that needs to be done."

State officials have set a goal of generating 5,000 megawatts of electricity from offshore wind power by 2030. That is part of a larger, more ambitious plan to move more Maine homes away from heating oil use to the latest technology of electric heat.

The technology to deploy wind turbines in waters 50 meters or deeper is still under development, including by a team of researchers at the University of Maine. Many of the designs feature platforms anchored to the ocean bottom by a series of large cables.

That raises concerns among fishermen whose nets, trawls and traps could damage or be damaged by the cables. Fishermen also are concerned about the possibility that they could be excluded from areas around turbines.

"The less bottom you take, the better we are going to get along," one fisherman told the panel members Saturday.

Fishermen as well as biologists and environmental organizations also have raised concerns about how the noise and vibrations from the spinning

turbines will affect marine life.

Neal Pettigrew, a University of Maine professor of physical oceanography, said that by placing the large turbines in deep waters, developers can mostly avoid bird flyways and minimize visual impacts from the shore. In Maine, 80 percent of the lobster catch is within three miles of the land, so locating platforms outside that area also would help reduce potential conflicts with fishermen, he said.

Additionally, Pettigrew provided the group with details of the monitoring buoy that is being deployed at a site near Monhegan Island where a university-led research group plans to erect test turbines. The university plans to conduct detailed monitoring of the turbines' potential effects on marine mammals and bottom-dwelling organisms as well as birds and bats.

LaPointe pointed out that a bill recently introduced in the Legislature to streamline Maine's review process for offshore wind projects would provide funding for research on marine issues tied to wind energy. LaPointe said the state also needs to develop updated maps of the ocean floor as well as surveys of fishing activities in those areas.

In New Jersey, some members of the fishing industry have gone beyond debating the pros and cons of offshore wind energy but are now part of industry itself.

Fishermen's Energy LLC, a consortium formed by several East Coast fishing companies, is developing a 20-megawatt wind farm off the coast of Atlantic City, N.J., and hopes to build a 350-megawatt wind energy facility. A wind farm of that size likely would feature 70 to 100 turbines, depending on the generation capacity of each machine.

Peter Hughes, fishing industry coordinator at Fishermen's Energy, said his company's partners view offshore wind as an opportunity given that fishermen know the seas in that area better than anyone and can operate vessels and heavy machinery in such harsh, deep-water conditions.

"We want to be agents of change rather than victims of change," Hughes told the crowd.

With its steady winds and deep waters relatively close to shore, the Gulf of Maine is attracting attention from U.S. and international wind development firms. Among them is Principle Power, a Seattle-based company working on floating-platform technology.

Des FitzGerald, vice president of business development for Principle Power, said his company was drawn to Maine, in part, because of the state's deep-water ports and well-established shipbuilding and marine construction industries. Those are key assets when building and deploying the enormous turbines and platforms.

"The reality is, these are so large — no matter the design — that there is no way they can be delivered by road, by rail or by sea," FitzGerald said. "They are going to be built on the shore, which is good news for Maine."