GUEST OPINION

Offshore Wind farms

BY CAPTAIN MICHAEL PIERDINOCK

There are thousands of acres of water in New England that have been leased to different energy generation companies associated with the siting of wind turbines in offshore federal waters. These areas include prime fishing grounds ranging from Cox's Ledge to east of The Claw and south to the Fingers and/or north of the Dump as indicated on the figures from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM). These areas were subject to ongoing geotechnical investigations by commercial vessels this past fishing season. These locations are only in the initial phase of the siting process and require additional geotechnical surveys as well as other environmentally-related surveys in an attempt to obtain approval to site the proposed wind turbine units. This will be a long, drawn-out process with several opportunities for public comment.

We are not talking about a few turbine units close to shore in state waters such as those off the southeast corner of Block Island, we are talking about hundreds of multistory units in a grid pattern encompassing prime fishing grounds. But no one wants to see hundreds of super large wind turbines in their backyard, better known as not in my backyard, so let's place the super monster wind turbines' units by the hundreds well offshore where they are out of sight. However, there was no consideration of the impact to the recreational anglers, charter boat captains and the commercial fleet as well as the impact to spawning grounds, forage fish, gamefish, turtles, whales and other marine mammals that are found in these areas.

The proposed areas are prime fishing grounds to our recreational and commercial fleets. Many of the easterly areas are spawning grounds for herring and squid. Cox's Ledge provides a mix of groundfish and pelagics with the other areas being pelagic hot spots for sharks, tuna, mahi and billfish.

We are being reassured that we will not be denied access to fish in these areas. Logic dictates that the use of bottom gear and nets typically associated with commercial fishing may not be safe and deemed not feasible in such areas. Insurance coverage may not be possible for the commercial fleet to fish within these areas. Is it possible that the same restrictions could be imposed on the recreational anglers and charter boat fleet to fish within the wind turbine areas? Is this the next surprise that results in denying us access to the fishery?

Then we get into the fact that some conclude that the recreational and charter boat fleet are not fishing within these areas based upon flawed Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data and charter boat fleet data tabled by a select few captains to site the Block Island wind turbines. It is well understood that both recreational anglers and charter boat captains from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York fish these waters.

How about the impact to spawning grounds, forage fish, gamefish, turtles, whales and marine mammals? Should we be concerned? The typical response is that the wind turbine units will create structure that results in habitat to attract forage and gamefish, like that which is observed beneath the oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. Most of us would agree that the base structures of the turbines will provide habitat favorable for forage fish and for ground fishing or targeting species such as striped bass and bluefish.

If we are targeting large pelagics such as makos, threshers, bluefin tuna, etc., how will one safely navigate around the base of the wind turbine structure(s) to avoid our gear getting chafed or tangled if one were to hook onto a ballistic monster mako or bluefin tuna? So how far should each wind turbine unit be placed or what is the appropriate distance between each unit so we can safely navigate and land pelagics in the turbine areas? A credible study assessing the adequate and safe distance to land pelagics is lacking and is absolutely necessary, reasonable and appropriate in order to site the units.

The Block Island wind turbine project is located near shore in state waters. The fish found within the Block Island wind turbine project waters did not include the large pelagics found in the proposed wind turbine areas well offshore in federal waters. The siting of the Block Island wind turbines did not include an evaluation and assessment of an appropriate grid pattern or distance between each turbine in order to safely navigate and fish for large pelagics. The species found in each area are significantly different and we are not comparing apples to apples. More study is needed.

And then we have navigational safety. The recreational anglers, charter boat and commercial fleet fish and typically navigate through this area only a few months out of the year and sometimes in nasty winds and seas. Have any studies been completed for these New England waters assessing what would be a safe distance between wind turbine platforms in order to safely navigate this area? Additionally, homeland security may implement "safety zones" and prohibit boating and fishing within the turbine fields.

Will the subsurface transmission cables and the vibrations of the devices have impact on the local fish populations, whales, turtles, etc.? Will the electrolysis of the subsurface cable negatively affect sharks? Sharks have electro receptors on their "noses" that can sense electrical charges. The sharks electro receptors are needed for the sharks to locate forage fish, gamefish and other matter in our waters for their very survival. Electrical charges are emitted by living and non-living matter. Will the electrolysis of a subsurface cable impact shark behavior? Studies of great white sharks conducted in our waters have shown that the sharks have had encounters and attacks of mini torpedo-like submarines as a result of the electrolysis emitted by the equipment. We need to see credible scientific studies of the impact of electrolysis from the miles of subsurface cable proposed from the wind turbines to shore. Studies will be needed on spawning grounds, forage fish, gamefish, pelagics, turtles and marine mammals that inhabit these areas.

On land there are restrictions regarding the safe distance of permitted activities from a turbine in the event of a turbine collapse. Will restrictions be implemented in the future out on the high seas? Will we be prevented from navigating or fishing in these areas in the event of ice, snow sheer as with land-based wind turbines?

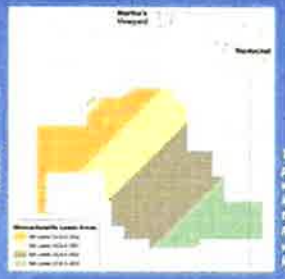
Then there is the noise and flicker effect. On land, locals are suffering from negative or stressful effects as a result of noise and shadowing flicker. Will this be a problem for those navigating this area or fishing on the high seas? Seems to be a problem with humans, how about fish and mammals in this area?

There are many examples of wind turbines throughout the world, but none are located as far offshore as is being proposed in our waters. The infrastructure needed and associated cost is such that the economics dictate that the turbines must be multistory in height in a tight grid pattern by the hundreds over a large area in order for the project to make economic sense. Also, ongoing maintenance costs will be magnified by the proposed turbine distance and environmental conditions. The New England federal water located well offshore is known for high winds and waves not to mention the highly corrosive saltwater environment.

Are we too eager to promote "green energy" that we are putting a blind eye to the hidden costs and impacts to the environment and the people that rely on such for their livelihood? Or will the public potentially be held responsible to pay for possible poor decisions just to promote this green energy.

I have more questions than I do answers and there are a lot of questions to be answered prior to the turbines being constructed. I am all for green energy that makes economic sense with manageable environmental impact. We will see if this is the case or if this is a clear case of not in my backyard clean green agenda that does not give a hoot about us and the impact on the environment. We need to get it in writing that we will not be denied access to fishing within these areas once they are constructed.

The proposed wind farm regions off Rhode Island include waters to the south and east of Cox's Ledge.



(courtesy of BOEM)

Traditional pelagic fishing waters are included in the proposed Massachusetts wind farm lease areas.

What effect might the proposed offshore wind farms have on both commercial and recreational fisheries here in New England?

(Photo courtesy of Ross Navin)