

University of Delaware professor says Bluewater's public-support approach a blueprint

By AARON NATHANS
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BOSTON -- The Delaware public embraced an offshore wind farm proposal in large part because of how the issue was framed, says a University of Delaware researcher. And that could be a powerful lesson for others.

University of Delaware associate professor Willett Kempton briefed the American Wind Energy Association last week about how Bluewater Wind won public support for a power purchase contract with Delmarva Power despite odds heavily stacked against the venture.

Kempton drew contrasts between reception the Delaware public gave Bluewater with the cold greeting many locals gave the Cape Wind proposal in Massachusetts.

Cape Wind developer Jim Gordon has proposed 130 turbines in Nantucket Sound, but locals, some quite powerful, complained the turbines would ruin their view.

After a long back-and-forth, the project won a favorable federal environmental review but still faces a tribal challenge over its impact on Nantucket Sound. Cape Wind is negotiating with the National Grid utility for a power purchase agreement.

Bluewater won a state competition to supply Delmarva Power with a stable-priced, reliable source of electricity, then hammered home a 25-year power purchase contract in 2008.

In winning the right to negotiate with Delmarva, Bluewater defeated a coal gasification plant proposal from NRG Energy initially thought to have the inside edge.

Kempton said the issue in Delaware was framed not as turbines versus pristine ocean view, but as wind versus coal.

"It was inadvertently created by policy," Kempton said, referring to a 2006 state request for proposals to build a new power plant. "It was set up in a way that made it easier to do in Delaware than it did in the Cape."

Kempton said Bluewater first heard of the Delaware bidding when he and another UD marine researcher, Jeremy Firestone, went looking for an offshore wind provider to make a bid.

Soon an ad-hoc coalition emerged with the public, environmental groups, Bluewater, University of Delaware faculty "and maverick political figures" like then-Treasurer Jack Markell lobbying for offshore wind, Kempton said.

Besides Delmarva and NRG, many state lawmakers and "skeptical academics" resisted, Kempton said.

Pro-Bluewater activists used positive thinking to show doubters the project was possible, Kempton said.

"Why wind is being held to a higher standard? I say it's just unfamiliarity," he said. "Any new technology is scary."

At the conference, the UD's Center for Carbon-Free Power Integration, of which Kempton is a researcher, released the results of a poll it conducted on Cape Cod residents' views toward offshore wind power. In a similar survey in 2005, 44 percent supported it and 56 percent opposed it. In the same survey this year, 57 percent support offshore wind, and 41 percent are against.

Kempton said the long review process for Cape Wind has helped inform residents and ease their concerns.

Ben Kelahan, senior vice president of energy for Saint Consulting, said, "An education process where people understand more about where their electricity comes from" is vital to the debate, Kelahan said. Wind developers need to motivate the public.

"Ask them to do something -- activate them," he said. "Visible support is what makes these decisions go smoothly."