

Building a bridge to offshore energy

By Kate O'Malley

The commercial fishing industry is facing a set of unprecedented challenges as our oceans become the new frontier in an ambitious national energy program quickly building momentum under the Obama administration.

In the near future, and rightfully so, significant national resources will be directed at renewable energy projects aimed at generating jobs, combating global warming and promoting security by increasing our independence from foreign oil.

Like it or not, we are about to enter a new phase where the marine environment will be expected to play a primary role in meeting the nation's energy needs. The future will bring offshore wind farms and tidal/wave energy projects, renewed efforts in offshore oil and gas exploration and drilling, and the need for infrastructure to transport these new sources of energy to where they are needed, along a populated coastline.

While much of the last three decades has focused on finding the right balance between fishing pressure and fishery resources, the new challenge will be to work together to embrace the promise of offshore energy without jeopardizing years of work to protect and rebuild valuable marine resources, and to carefully plan ways to lessen the impacts to existing livelihoods dependent on those resources. To do this, the commercial fishing industry must become informed, speak with a common voice, and quickly find a way to play a constructive role in ensuring that offshore energy development and commercial fishing can coexist compatibly.

In the foreseeable future, 51,000 wind turbines are projected for the East Coast. In Rhode Island, the race to be among the first in offshore wind farm development is well underway. The state has contracted

with a developer and fast-tracked a project to build two offshore wind farms within the next few years. Eight turbines are to be built off Block Island in state waters followed by 100 more to be built further offshore in federal waters. A two-year project currently underway will zone offshore waters for multiple uses. Incredibly and regrettably this does not include any fisheries field research work.

As leaders of the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island, representing a wide range of industry associations, we are not opposed to Rhode Island working to develop alternative energy sources. We are deeply concerned, however, that potential sites for wind farms and other projects be carefully evaluated for potential impacts on fisheries.

Fisheries field research programs, and adequate funding to support these, are needed to evaluate potential sites (to verify what fishermen may know from their years of experience fishing in these areas), and to establish baseline information for ongoing monitoring programs designed to assess impacts from construction and operation. Important considerations include critical spawning, nursery, feeding areas; how construction practices best fit with natural life cycles to avoid damage (e.g., lobster larval settlement areas can be damaged by blasting to install wind tower foundations); how acoustics (noise transmission and vibration from support towers of wind turbines) affect fish and crustacean behavior; the impacts of electromagnetic fields from cables on certain species of fish (elasmobranchs, such as dogfish); how currents will change around wind farm structures; how sediment will be disposed of from cable channels and excavation.

Important topics for industry to be involved with include where offshore energy projects are sited, how and when they are constructed, how they are maintained, avoiding pollution and habitat destruction,

how they will eventually be decommissioned and dismantled, and determining navigational risks at sea.

With the right support, this collaborative approach can be the model. Fishermen in Rhode Island have been looking favorably at the work of the British Wind Energy Association and its recommendation for a fisheries liaison to include industry from the planning stage through the monitoring stage.

Commercial fishermen should be thought of as partners, not as obstacles. Fishermen, in turn, need to recognize that this is the future and focus on directing it in the best way possible.

So how do we get there? Clearly, there is a need for a national energy policy that protects existing marine resources and the health and long-term sustainability of this important national food source, and recognizes our fishermen's ability to earn a living is just as critical to the success of these projects as the nation moves forward with the development of offshore energy sources. In the meantime, though, projects continue on a fast track, commercial fishermen in Rhode Island continue voicing concern about the lack of fisheries field research and keep looking for the best way to work with the state and the developer so that in the race to be one of the first, we don't sacrifice getting this right.

Our nation's commercial fishing industry has a major stake in supporting efforts to get this right early on. How we choose to represent ourselves now as an industry and how successful we are at getting a real seat at the table will have a profound impact on all those who fish off our coasts. Our country's fishing heritage, the sustainability and accessibility of



Representatives of industry associations statewide have joined forces under the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island.

a key food source for our nation and the long-term success of important alternative energy initiatives is riding on it. Let us work together to preserve and protect the open ocean and its resources for future generations to enjoy and harvest and make a lasting contribution to a progressive and sensible energy plan for our nation.

For more information on the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island's work on these issues and to continue this discussion, please visit www.cfcri.com.

Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island Members: Ocean State Fishermen's Association, R.I. Lobstermen's Association, R.I. Commercial Fishermen's Association, R.I. Party and Charter Boat Association, Atlantic Offshore Lobstermen's Association, R.I. Monkfishermen's Association, Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation, Point Judith Fishermen's Memorial Foundation, Point Judith Fishermen's Scholarship Foundation. **NF**

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