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Dominion Energy plans major offshore wind farm near Virginia Beach

By Gregory S. Schneider

6-8 minutes



An offshore wind turbine under construction off Block Island, R.I., in 2016. (Michael Dwyer/AP)

RICHMOND — Dominion Energy is proposing a major offshore wind farm off the coast of Virginia Beach that would be the largest of its kind in the country.

The company said Thursday that it plans to expand a test project that's already under construction to build up to 220 giant wind turbines on a patch of ocean 27 miles off the coast. The project would generate 2,600 megawatts of electricity by 2026, enough energy to power 650,000 homes. It is estimated to cost \$7.8 billion.

[*\[Utility taking cautious approach as Virginia offshore wind project gets underway\]*](#)

The proposal “shows how serious we are about bringing commercial-scale offshore wind to Virginia, giving our customers what they have asked for – more renewable energy,” Dominion vice president Mark D. Mitchell said in a news release.

The announcement came just days after Gov. Ralph Northam (D) issued an executive order calling on state agencies to develop a plan for Virginia to produce 30 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030 and to be fully carbon-free by 2050.

Northam's order specified that such an offshore wind farm be completed by 2026 and generate 2,500 megawatts.

Dominion is building a demonstration project at the 112,800-acre ocean site that it leases from the federal government off the Virginia Beach resort strip. That \$300 million test will have a pair of turbines up by next spring, generating about 12 megawatts later in 2020.

Lessons from that project will help get the bigger effort going,

Dominion said.

“Governor Northam is proud to see Dominion taking significant steps to harness the power of offshore wind,” spokeswoman Alena Yarmosky said via text message. “Virginia has a unique opportunity to become a national leader in offshore wind technology, management and deployment — the governor is committed to working with Dominion and other partners to realize this goal.”

[*\[Feds reconsidering pitch for power lines near historic Jamestown, but there's a hitch: They're already built\]*](#)

Environmental groups had a mixed reaction to the company's plans.

“We certainly support harnessing this untapped renewable energy resource off our coast and are excited about the prospect of being a national leader in offshore wind,” Lee Francis, spokesman for the Virginia League of Conservation Voters, said. “But it seems like Dominion is talking out of both sides of their mouth when it comes to cutting emissions and building out clean energy.”

He criticized the state's biggest utility for opposing efforts to join the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a carbon-trading platform involving several states in the northeast. And his group and others sharply criticized Dominion for building the \$7 billion, 600-mile [Atlantic Coast Pipeline](#), which is cutting a path across some of the state's most pristine wilderness to carry natural gas.

“We can’t determine whether this project is the right size or cost for Virginia, until we know Dominion’s plans for ramping down its fossil fuel fleet, cancelling the unnecessary Atlantic Coast Pipeline, and maximizing energy efficiency programs, which reduce customer bills and energy demands,” Southern Environmental Law Center lawyer Will Cleveland said.

Some environmental groups lobbed the same complaint at Northam’s goal for renewable energy, praising the overall idea while lamenting that he included natural gas and nuclear energy as steps toward a lower-carbon future.

“Northam’s order ignores the fracked-gas elephant in the room,” said Harrison Wallace, Virginia director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network. “If we are going to solve the climate crisis, we cannot continue supporting and investing in proposed fracked-gas pipelines.”

Dominion, a state-regulated monopoly, has long been the single most generous corporate donor to state politicians of both parties, and used its pull with the General Assembly to help craft a regulatory overhaul last year that gives it leeway to invest excess profits in new energy projects instead of returning them to ratepayers.

[*\[Dominion bill passes House with key change aimed at helping consumers\]*](#)

With all 140 seats in the General Assembly on the ballot this November, 40 incumbent lawmakers and 47 candidates have pledged not to take donations from Dominion, according to the advocacy group Clean Virginia. In addition, the Democratic

Party of Virginia has decided to stop taking contributions from Dominion or the much smaller Appalachian Power Co., state party chairwoman Susan Swecker said this week on the Blue Virginia web site.

[\[Costco, Walmart and other big retailers try to break Dominion Energy's grip in Virginia\]](#)

Dominion argues that it needs leeway from the state to make the expensive pivot from old forms of power generation, such as coal, to new solar and wind markets that are still taking shape.

The company's offshore wind turbines, with blades reaching 600 feet above the ocean's surface, are the first to be built in federal waters anywhere in the U.S. Rhode Island already has five wind turbines up and running in state waters. Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Delaware, Connecticut and other states are also in the early stages of cranking up offshore wind projects.

Dominion said it has filed an application to link the project to the electrical grid with PJM, the regional organization that coordinates power transmission for 13 northeastern states and the District of Columbia. A spokeswoman said the initial cost estimate is based on efforts in European countries, and said the company will build a local supply chain and work to drive down costs.

It will have to seek federal environmental approvals and work through Virginia's State Corporation Commission and other agencies as it does whenever it seeks to build a new

generation facility, Dominion spokeswoman Samantha Q. Moore said.

Ocean survey work begins next year, she said. The company will submit a construction and operations plan to the federal government by 2022 and hopes to get the first block of turbines online in 2024.

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