

Summary for the Morro Bay Wind Energy Area Environmental Assessment Scoping Comment Period April 2022

Background

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) conducted a 60-day public scoping period from November 11, 2021 to January 11, 2022 to solicit comments to inform the development of an Environmental Assessment (EA) on the Morro Bay Wind Energy Area (WEA), located approximately 20 miles offshore the central California coastline. BOEM hosted two virtual public scoping meetings on December 1, 2021 and January 5, 2022 to outline the planned environmental review process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), to answer questions on the process, and to solicit public input on issues to be considered.

BOEM received 1,262 comments from the public, other state and federal agencies, and interested groups and stakeholders. This included 86 unique submissions and 1,175 form letters. All comments are available at www.regulations.gov under Docket No. BOEM-2021-0044. BOEM acknowledges all comments received and will consider the information provided in the development of the EA. Many commenters did not restrict their comments to the proposed action of issuance of commercial leases and site characterization & assessment activities but included comments on wind energy development.

Comments on Purpose and Need

Several commenters said that the creation of wind farms, such as in Morro Bay, are fundamental to the transition away from fossil fuels, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, prevention of irreversible damages from climate change, and mitigation of extreme weather events in California. Commenters noted the need for renewable power sources in California and that this project could be part of a transition from the use of fossil fuels to the use of renewable energies.

Response: The Purpose and Need of the Proposed Action is to facilitate the assessment of the environmental characteristics and wind energy potential of areas of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) of the Morro Bay WEA through the issuance of commercial leases, is described in Section 2 of the EA.

Scope of Analysis in the EA

Many commenters expressed concern or confusion about the scope of analysis in the EA. Several commenters asked that the EA include an analysis of the impacts of all phases of wind energy development, including the siting, construction, and operation of wind towers throughout their life cycle. Other commenters asked that the analysis in the EA include a discussion of onshore impacts from cable placement.

Response: As noted in Section 1.1, BOEM does not consider the issuance of a lease to constitute an irreversible and irretrievable commitment of agency resources; therefore, this analysis does not consider the impacts associated with the siting, construction, and operation of any commercial wind power facilities. Section 1.1 also notes that while site characterization activities that extend into state waters and onshore to ports or existing substations are a reasonably foreseeable result of a wind energy lease issued in the Morro Bay WEA, BOEM is not authorizing any activities in state waters and onshore areas and does not have regulatory authority to apply mitigation measures outside of the OCS.

Alternatives

Commenters requested that BOEM include an alternative to providing renewable energy for the central California coast that does not rely solely on offshore wind. Other commenters suggested BOEM include an alternative to mitigate impacts to marine mammals. A few commenters argued for the selection of the “No Action” alternative if the analysis in the EA disclosed significant impacts.

Response: BOEM's description of and rationale for its range of alternatives is described in Sections 1.1, 1.3, and 1.4, and the Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action is described in Section 2. As explained in these sections, alternatives analyzed must meet the purpose and need of the proposed action, which is to facilitate the assessment of the environmental characteristics and wind energy potential of areas of the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) of the Morro Bay WEA through the issuance of commercial leases within the WEA and granting of rights-of-way (ROWs) and rights-of-use and easements (RUEs). Sources of renewable energy other than offshore wind would not meet this purpose and need. All mitigation that BOEM determined appropriate for marine mammals in Appendix C.

Environmental Resources

Several comments expressed concerns about protection of avian and mammal species. Comments covered individual species analysis, collision, entanglement, displacement, and overall concerns regarding the impacts of climate change.

Response: Best management practices to mitigate impacts to birds are described in Section 3.9.2.2. All mitigation that BOEM determined appropriate for marine mammals is listed in Appendix D. If leases or grants are issued, BOEM may require the lessee to comply with these measures, as deemed appropriate at the time of review, through ongoing Endangered Species Act measures, lease stipulations and/or as conditions of SAP approval.

Commercial, Tribal, and Recreational Fishing

Commenters brought up possible use conflicts in the WEA and how these could impact fishing. Commenters requested meaningful participation and more involvement in the general offshore wind process. Numerous commenters, including a form letter campaign, made general statements that raised concerns about the impact the Morro Bay Wind Energy developments would have on the economy of commercial fishermen. Others commented on potential navigation hazards in the Morro Bay Harbor.

Response: Impacts to commercial fishing are described in Section 3.7, which notes that while space-use conflicts are possible, the area of effect would for most fisheries be confined to a small portion of the total area available for fishing and that potential effects to commercial fishing from the Proposed Action are expected to be temporary in duration (5 years or less). BOEM is currently working with the U.S Coast Guard on its “Pacific Port Access Route Study” (PACPARS) to evaluate safe access routes for the movement of vessel traffic along the western seaboard.

Comments Noted but Outside of the Scope of the Proposed Action

Many commenters had concerns about turbine technologies, their interface with the environment, and the impact of wind towers on the viewshed of coastal areas. Other comments included general requests for further analysis or data acquisition relating to the seafloor, the benthic environment, economics, water quality, and other resources.

Response: As noted in Section 1.1, BOEM does not consider the issuance of a lease to constitute an irreversible and irretrievable commitment of agency resources; therefore, this analysis does not consider the impacts associated with the siting, construction, and operation of any commercial wind power facilities. BOEM appreciates the information submitted and will use to inform future and on-going research as well as future processes.