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Seven bids for a wind farm

By Peter Voskamp

Seven bidders have answered Gov. Donald Carcieri's call for proposals to build an offshore wind farm likely to be placed in areas to the south and west of Block Island.

The state Division of Purchasing unsealed the proposals Friday, May 30.

The seven companies are Allco Renewable Energy Group Limited, of New York; Bluewater Wind of Providence; Deep Water Wind Rhode Island, of New Jersey; DKRW Wind, from Houston; Fishermen's Energy of Rhode Island, Bristol; Great Eastern Wind, Providence; and WindPowerPro.US, of Purchase, N.Y.

The division's website indicates that 65 companies downloaded bid information for the "Rhode Island Energy Independence 1 Project."

Andrew Dzykewicz of the state energy office said Wednesday that bid details would remain confidential until the winner is selected. The governor's office is currently assembling a committee to undertake the due diligence to ascertain the viability of each bidder, he said. A selection is expected by the end of the summer.

Mega money/watts

Carcieri's request asked for wind farms that could provide 15 percent of the state's electricity needs, or 1.3 million megawatt hours of energy.

The state will not finance the farm, but will help usher the selected project through the regulatory process. Dzykewicz said previous state estimates of the project's cost were between \$1.25 billion to \$1.5 billion.

Two of the bidders did not have public phone numbers or websites with contact information.

A few of the other five companies, mindful of the confidentiality agreement with the state, were willing to provide some information.

Erich Stephens of Bluewater Wind said that there has yet to be a large offshore wind farm developed in the United States; they exist primarily in Europe and parts of Asia. Bluewater, he said, has assembled a group of consultants, engineers and contractors that have built 22 of the 28 operating offshore wind farms in the world. Bluewater has a relationship with Fluor, currently constructing the what will be the largest offshore wind farm in the world — Greater Gabbard — off Great Britain, Stephens said.

Greater Gabbard will have a capacity of 504 megawatts, and it will comprise 140 wind turbines.

Bluewater, founded in 2000 by Peter D. Mandelstam, current chair of the board of the American Wind Energy Association's Offshore Wind working group, is now a subsidiary of the corporate giant Babcock & Brown.

Stephens said that Bluewater began its own research of offshore Rhode Island sites two years ago, around the time the state commissioned its own study.

The company brought different parameters and assumptions to its study, said Stephens, and identified "more opportunity" in state waters than the state's study did.

Stephens said that while the company looked at the Block Island sites highlighted in Carcieri's request, Bluewater preferred to look at the process as selecting a developer, not necessarily a site.

If a Block Island location is eventually chosen, the company would work with the town and residents to ensure a happy outcome, Stephens said.

Tiberu Tajts, president of WindpowerPro.US, said he envisions approximately 120 floating turbines, anchored to the sea floor, with a cable to the island. The project would employ 2,500 people, said Tajts, and the turbines would be towed to the chosen sites by tugboats rather than by a "jumping jack" vessel used for projects in Europe. According to Tajts, the farm would be "the largest in the whole world" and would be "quite a lot of work."

Fishermen's Energy of Rhode Island (FERI) "plans to build wind farms in Rhode Island waters capable of producing approximately 400 megawatts of electricity" and "proposes 80 individual wind turbine generators, situated within state waters, between two to three miles off the southern coast of Block Island," according to a press release.

FERI is an offshoot of Fishermen's Energy of New Jersey, which has proposed a 350 mw system off New Jersey. FERI spokesperson Rhonda Jackson explained that the group is a consortium of 10 commercial fishing companies. The philosophy behind the group is that fishermen have a stake in where the farms go, so they should be leading the effort. Jackson explains, "Historically, one of the key barriers to offshore wind farms has been fishermen themselves, due to fear of loss of fishing grounds. By including this constituency, Fishermen's Energy has turned this negative into an overwhelming positive."

The company, established a year ago, has yet to build any large projects. It is working to install wind turbines for a desalinization plant and a Coast Guard training facility, both in Cape May, N.J.

Another bidder, DKRW, based in Houston, is, according to its website, "among the most experienced wind energy companies in the United States." Its current projects include a 700 mw capacity system in Sweetwater, Texas; a 130 mw development with 44 turbines in Kibby Mountain, Maine, in partnership with TransCanada; an 800 mw complex near Medicine Bow, Wyo.; a 300 mw project north of Gladstone, N.M.; and a more ambitious 3,000 mw development over two counties in New Mexico.

DKRW did not return calls for comment.

Allco Renewables is already familiar to the state, having submitted an application to the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) for a large wind farm in Rhode Island waters last fall. While the CRMC determined the application to be incomplete, the process revealed that the state did not have ample rules and regulations in place to provide for the permitting of large alternative energy projects.

Allco did not care to comment on its bid, but spokesman Bill Fischer did say that Allco works with Outland Renewable Energy, based in Minnesota.

The CRMC, in league with the University of Rhode Island, has plans to create an ocean special management plan (SAMP) to identify and regulate optimal locations in state waters for such projects.

Dzykewicz cautioned that capacity does not necessarily translate into energy.

He said that "met" (meteorological) towers required to gather critical wind, current and weather data at different ocean sites will be installed by the winning bidder.

Henry du Pont, a Block Island resident who is also president of Lorax Energy Systems, is skeptical of the ambitious proposals (see Guest Opinion, Page 7). Contacted this week at "Windpower 2008," the American Wind Energy Association Exhibition in Houston, duPont said that technology is not yet available to place wind turbines in deep water at a cost favorable to ratepayers. Most offshore wind farms are in protected waters, he said, not in the open ocean with "2,000 miles of fetch."