

Conference looks at renewable energy

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Renewable energy is not the panacea for America's energy crisis, but alternative energy experts say that during the next few decades, it could help to ease the pain.

Power generated by wind, waves and ocean current is fast becoming an important component of the nation's energy mix, and its role will only continue to grow, said Randall Luthi, director of the Minerals Management Service, a division of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

By 2010, renewable energy sources will surpass nuclear power plants in primary energy production, Luthi told participants at Energy Ocean 2008, a conference devoted to ocean-based renewable energy that is taking place this week in Galveston.

By 2030, renewable energy is predicted to come close to equaling petroleum-based energy production, Luthi said.

"People living on the Gulf Coast should be very excited about that," he said. "Texas is already working on renewable energy projects. That sets the framework for companies that want to extend their efforts farther out."

Unlike other coastal states, Texas has jurisdiction over the waters and the seafloor for nine nautical miles off its coastline. Although long considered inseparable from the oil and gas industry, Texas has become the poster child for the development of offshore renewable energy, Luthi said.

Plans to diversify

That surprises many people, but state officials understand the need to diversify the energy-generated income stream, said Jerry Patterson, commissioner of the Texas General Land Office.

"This is energy, and we're in the energy business," Patterson said of renewable projects. "We realize that revenues from the oil and gas industry will go away one day."

The land office gets royalties from oil and gas production, funds that help fund public education. It also collects royalties for leases on public land required for renewable energy projects.

Texas leads the nation in installed wind power production capacity, at 4,356 megawatts, according to land office figures.

Installed wind energy generating capacity throughout the United States now totals 16,818 megawatts, according to the American Wind Energy Association. It is expected to generate 48 billion kilowatt hours of wind energy this year, enough to provide slightly more than 1 percent of the nation's electricity supply and power the equivalent of more than 4.5 million homes.

Moving offshore

While all of Texas's producing wind turbines are currently on land, at least one offshore project is expected to start production in the next few years.

The state in 2005 leased 11,355 acres about eight miles off Galveston to a Louisiana-based company with plans for a 50-turbine wind farm.

With some development already taking place in state waters, private companies are bound to be interested in expanding those efforts into federal waters, Luthi said.

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 gave the Minerals Management Service the authority to develop a program to manage alternative energy projects. The agency is about to publish in the federal register newly proposed rules to regulate projects on the outer continental shelf, in federal waters.

The agency intends to complete the regulations by the end of this year, Luthi said.

The rules will pave the way for companies to submit proposals for using the underwater public land for renewable energy projects.

Luthi said he expected to have a lot of applications to review.

“Gas prices are continuing to rise, and it hurts,” he said. “It absolutely hurts. Never has the need been greater to develop alternative energy sources.”

Source: Galveston Daily News