

S. Carolina considering wind power

By Kirsten Singleton | *Morris News Service*

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COLUMBIA - Ralph Nichols, a Savannah River National Laboratory engineer, can envision a time when ocean breezes power the production of hydrogen that is used to generate electricity for South Carolina homes and businesses, particularly in remote areas where access to other power sources is scarce.

The result: a clean-burning fuel source that is entirely homegrown.

"All the pieces exist," Mr. Nichols said.

What's been lacking is coordination between researchers and energy companies, industry leaders and governmental agencies.

That coordination took a big step forward last week when experts from around the country and around the world met in Charleston for the first time, during the two-day Southeast Regional Offshore Wind Power Symposium.

Their vision? Jobs. Millions of dollars poured into the Georgia and Carolina economies. Energy security. Clean-burning fuels. All founded on the winds off the Southeastern shore.

Their conclusions? Offshore wind-power production is possible in the United States, the Carolinas and Georgia are particularly well-suited to the task, and it's time to get started.

Offshore wind is "a big resource," said Jeff Freedman of AWS Truewind, which provides the wind maps, forecasting, modeling and other services needed to create an offshore wind park.

Europe generates electricity from offshore winds, but no such projects exist in the United States. Two, though, are in the works off the shores of Long Island, N.Y., and Massachusetts.

"We're a little behind them in terms of engineering and planning because we haven't been thinking about it that much," Mr. Nichols said.

Mr. Freedman said the Georgia-Carolinas region holds great possibility because of its wide continental shelf - important because technology has limited off-shore wind farms to areas where the water is less than 50 feet deep.

How much energy is produced depends on several factors, including the size of the project.

The Long Island park, for example, is expected to consist of 40 turbines capable of generating about 140 megawatts, enough to power 44,000 homes, according to WindWorks Long Island, a partnership supporting the project.

There are impediments to developing offshore projects, and drawbacks.

Among them: startup costs that run into the millions, the potential disruption of marine-based industries during construction, concerns over whether wind power will be more expensive than other sources and the aesthetics of wind turbines dotting the horizon. For the Long Island project, some turbines will be as close as 3.6 miles offshore.

In the Southeast, on a clear day, turbines probably could be seen along the horizon five to six miles out, Mr. Freedman said.

Experts also point out the benefits - notably, the potential for a homegrown energy source and the economic development and jobs that would result.

South Carolina imports almost all of its fuel sources.

"That's dollars that we have to send outside the state," said Laura Varn, Santee Cooper's vice president for corporate communications.

South Carolina Electric & Gas spokesman Robert Yanity said the company is interested in learning more about wind power.

But it's investing in nuclear power to meet the demand expected by 2015, he said.

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