

Red tape isn't empowering

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Last week the Cape Wind energy project proposed for Nantucket Sound continued its tortuous, seven-year path through the regulatory approval process with a series of federal hearings. Efforts to build the project were not helped when a Dutch firm parachuted in late in the week to offer what it called "an alternative" proposal farther offshore.

Evidence suggests that as many as a dozen projects the size of Cape Wind and the Dutch proposal will be needed in the next decade. Pitting them against each other will not move the region closer to reducing emissions linked to global warming.

Cape Wind continues to be the victim of high-powered efforts to subvert the regulatory process and inject as many hurdles as possible, not to make it a better project but to derail it entirely. The controversy highlights in stark terms just how far the region must go to achieve its environmental, energy and economic goals.

Cape Wind was proposed well before the region adopted aggressive goals to reduce greenhouse gases, but well after years of political debate and the passage of state and federal legislation to encourage the development of renewable resources.

A likely consequence of the past seven years has been hesitancy by other developers to propose large, complex energy projects here.

Unfortunately, actions by our political leaders and regulators during the Cape Wind saga may be viewed as a barometer of the region's commitment and ability to reduce greenhouse gases; to develop the network to deliver wind energy and other renewables from remote areas; to replace aging power plants; and to overcome its perceived hostility toward investments in technologies including new or advanced coal and nuclear power plants as well as wind.

For now, that barometer suggests a stormy period ahead. While there have been recent energy development successes in the region - including approval of new LNG terminals and a few major electric transmission lines - challenges to ensure clean, reliable and affordable power are daunting.

A report by the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry group in Washington, D.C., shows just how difficult it will be for New England to reduce greenhouse gases from electricity generation. Success, the report says, will depend on development of 10 or more projects the size of Cape Wind over the next decade.

Under any circumstance, this would be an unprecedented and perhaps impossible challenge. Yet, this estimate - 10 plants in 10 years - is based on a low-electricity demand-growth scenario. If Cape Wind and Blue H are both built, the region will still need five times as much wind capacity in the next decade as these two projects combined.

The region cannot ignore any energy options for achieving multiple, complex and interrelated energy, environmental and economic goals.

For instance, the report makes the case for maintaining all of the region's existing nuclear power plants. It also makes a case for adding at least one of the new evolutionary nuclear plants proposed in most other parts of the country.

After the subverted and tortuous process that Cape Wind has endured, it would be folly not to recognize that energy developers will continue to have second thoughts about New England. Certainly, no nuclear plant builder is looking here. But if we are serious about global warming and ensuring the security and affordability of our power supplies, then we must be serious about allowing projects to either succeed or fail on the merits in a timely manner, based on scientifically and legally defined criteria.

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