

Union Backs Offshore Wind Power In VA

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — Labor leaders representing steelworkers, the construction trades and shipbuilders added their collective clout Tuesday to the drive to develop offshore wind power in waters off Virginia.

The union leaders said Virginia has the skilled workforce to help build an industry that one estimate said could generate more than 10,000 jobs.

Bill Harriday of the United Steelworkers said the 8,000 members who work at Newport News' Huntington Ingalls shipyard are up to the challenge of constructing and assembling wind turbines that rise hundreds of feet from the ocean floor.

"We build aircraft carriers," Harriday said in an interview. "I think we can build wind turbines."

The shipyard is the only one in the U.S. that builds aircraft carriers.

"We see this as a growth industry," Harriday said of the nascent wind turbine industry in the U.S., which lags behind Europe. "We have the skills and the ability and we have the people who are willing to work hard."

The union leaders were brought together by the Sierra Club of Virginia to press Gov. Bob McDonnell and Dominion Virginia Power to push forward on developing offshore winds. The state has ideal winds and ocean depths off Virginia Beach for wind farms, scientists say.

The Virginia Coastal Energy Research Consortium estimates that a 3,000-megawatt coastal wind energy project developed over 20 years would create 10,000 jobs for Virginians, including 5,000 permanent operation and maintenance jobs.

The Interior Department has identified hundreds of square miles of ocean along the coasts of Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey in which it wants to spur wind energy development.

McDonnell has made energy development a cornerstone of his Republican administration, but critics have said he should shift more focus to offshore winds and other renewables. He embraces an "all-of-the-above" approach that includes coal, offshore oil, natural gas and nuclear, in addition to solar, wind and bioenergy.

In response to Tuesday's news conference, Dominion said the utility is studying land-based and offshore wind generation, but the technology is challenged by high construction costs, an uncertain federal regulatory climate and "the intermittent characteristics of wind generation."

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The utility also pointed to a \$500,000 study announced this month by the U.S. Department of Energy and aimed at reducing the higher cost of wind power. The grant was awarded to Dominion, Virginia Tech and others.

Harriday, who said his members' wages range from \$15-\$18 an hour, said rank and file "wouldn't mind paying a little bit more go get this industry going."

Harriday said the steelworkers are already working with Gamesa Technology Corp., which has opened an Offshore Wind Technology Center in Chesapeake. The center is designing prototypes for the next generation of offshore wind systems in the United States.

"Our workers stand uniquely equipped and trained to tackle green energy projects like offshore wind power," said Josh Collins of the Laborers' International Union of North America. "We believe our workforce to be one-of-a-kind when it comes to constructing advanced-tech wind turbines."

Other unions represented at the news conference included the International Brotherhood of Electric Workers, iron workers and the Building and Construction Trades Council.

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