

The Washington Post

Study: Wind could be 24 pct. of New England power

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The Associated Press
Friday, December 17, 2010; 5:26 PM

BOSTON -- New England's land and ocean winds blow strong enough to supply nearly a quarter of the region's electricity within a decade, though major upgrades are needed to handle that much more wind power, according to a new study.

Wind has the potential to supply up to 24 percent of the region's total annual electricity needs by 2020, according to research by GE Energy Applications & Systems Engineering, which conducted the study for regional grid manager, ISO New England.

The figure would require a more than 44-fold increase over the amount of wind power now generated in the region. There aren't nearly enough wind farms even proposed yet to capture that much power, and delivering it would require spending \$19 billion to \$25 billion for new transmission lines, said the ISO's president and chief executive, Gordon van Welie.

Reaching 24 percent wind power "would a pretty lofty goal to get to by 2020," John Norden, the ISO's director of operations, said in an interview Friday.

But he said his agency must think ahead, in case public policymakers require dramatically higher reliance on wind power. The question is, Norden said, "If (policymakers) headed in that direction, and they headed in that direction quickly, would we have a problem in terms of operating the system?"

The two-year New England Wind Integration Study measured wind potential and aimed to determine exactly what's needed to link future wind power producers to the grid. The study was released Friday, but ISO officials discussed it publicly this week.

GE Energy Applications & Systems Engineering is part of General Electric, a leading wind turbine maker. The report's data and results were examined by an independent "technical review committee" made up of six industry experts who don't work for GE or the ISO.

The study found the best offshore winds in southern New England waters and off the coast of Maine. Onshore winds were particularly potent in the mountainous areas of northern Vermont and Maine.

Most of those breezes are a long way from being tapped.

Right now, New England produces 270 megawatts of wind power. There are about 2,800 megawatts more of

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offshore and onshore wind proposed in the region, with the 468-megawatt Cape Wind project in Nantucket Sound among the largest and most well known. (One megawatt powers 750 to 1,000 homes.) But to get 24 percent of its power from wind, the region would have to install up to 12,000 megawatts worth of turbines.

The GE Energy study recommended more research to see if it's even possible to make the massive and costly upgrades to the transmission system that would be required. It also highlighted the need for adequate and flexible power generators that can be ramped up and down quickly to ensure the regional power supply stays steady and reliable as winds speeds vary.

And the study emphasized improved wind forecasting so grid operators can avoid committing too much, or too little, power generation to the system as they try to smooth out wind's ups and downs.

More wind power would improve the mix of fuels the region relies on for energy, and can be a reliable source of renewable energy at a stable price, Van Welie said during a call with reporters Wednesday.

It can also help the region reach mandates to increase renewable energy and efficiency. Taken together, the six New England states have a collective goal to meet 30 percent of their power needs from renewable sources and better energy efficiency by 2020.

The ISO is "agnostic" about which renewable resources - such as hydropower, wind, solar, wood energy - states use to meet renewable energy goals, said spokeswoman Ellen Foley. The study is clear, though, that wind can be a key part of the New England mix.

"The potential is there, but it depends on public policy," Foley said.

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