

Ontario scraps offshore wind power plans

Published On Sat Feb 12 2011



John Laforet, president of Wind Concerns Ontario, called the provincial government's decision "excellent."

TARA WALTON/TORONTO STAR



By [Tanya Talaga](#) Queen's Park Bureau

The provincial government has suddenly abandoned any plans to construct offshore wind projects.

Citing environmental concerns, the Liberals made the surprising announcement Friday that they have placed a moratorium on building wind power projects in freshwater lakes.

While there are currently no offshore wind projects anywhere in Ontario, the issue has been a political problem for the Liberals as the October election inches closer and seats in rural areas are up for grabs. Anti-wind activists living along the Scarborough Bluffs also vigorously oppose any plans to construct offshore wind farms in Lake Ontario.

Activist voices have dogged Premier Dalton McGuinty when he travels to rural communities where wind turbine projects have been installed or are planned.

They say the low-frequency noise from the turbines causes health problems such as nose bleeds and headaches.

The premier has argued the push for wind is needed as Ontario phases out coal-fired plants and the push is made toward a green energy economy.

A Liberal insider confided that officials scrambled to announce the climbdown shortly after noon Friday when they realized it would be buried by the news from Egypt.

On Saturday, a senior adviser to McGuinty, said the timing of the announcement was determined earlier and had nothing to do with events overseas.

“You can take a shot at us for announcing it on a Friday, but the Egypt stuff is ... just false,” said the high-ranking official.

But Energy Minister Brad Duguid denied the move was politically motivated. He said it was done for environmental reasons.

“There isn’t a lot of science on freshwater offshore wind while there is tons of science on land wind farms,” Duguid told the *Star*.

Building offshore wind turbine projects in freshwater lakes is early in development and there are no projects in North America, he added.

There is one pilot project in Sweden at Lake Vanern and another has been proposed in Ohio.

“We need some time to review the science and we don’t have it today,” he said.

The Liberals will not back down on their land-based wind turbine projects, he added. “We have shown a lot of leadership on the energy file and we haven’t backed away one bit from tough decisions,” he said. “Our generation has to think of our responsibility here ... to get out of coal, get cleaner air and provide a healthier future for our kids.”

Anti-wind activists called the reversal a victory.

John Laforet, president of Wind Concerns Ontario, called the move “excellent” but said the Liberals don’t care about the environment.

“If they cared for it they wouldn’t be allowing on land projects either,” Laforet said, adding he’s watched wind projects go up after forests have been blasted down.

“I think what they have realized is they have unleashed hell on themselves before an election and we aren’t going away,” he said. “One side of me feels vindicated in being a volunteer in this role ... but at the same time I don’t believe for a second these guys care for the environment.”

Opposition critics called the announcement a spectacular policy backtrack.

The entire green energy act was founded on political science, not actual science, said Progressive Conservative energy critic John Yakabuski.

“This is a complete admission that these guys have a failed energy policy and never went through the proper planning in the first place,” said Yakabuski (Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke).

“Everything these people do is based on whether or not it will get them votes.”

Pausing wind turbine projects proves the government is making a laughingstock of itself, said NDP energy critic Peter Tabuns (Toronto-Danforth).

“It’s entirely possible this is a decision based entirely on saving a few seats,” Tabuns said.

“They flip-flopped on the Oakville gas plant and now there’s another big reversal from Brad Duguid,” Tabuns added of the energy minister, who cancelled plans to build the natural gas-powered electricity plant last October saying it was no longer needed. “They’re turning their backs on everything they’ve said.”

Offshore projects are merely a fraction of the government’s renewable energy plan, Duguid added.

So far, 1,530 feed-in-tariff applications for mostly wind and solar projects have been received by the government to date but less than five were for offshore wind projects, he said.

And only one offshore contract in Kingston with Windstream has been accepted out of the almost 1,300 approved contracts, Duguid said.

“That one project contract won’t be cancelled, it’ll be extended until the science is done,” Duguid said.

Jeff Garrah, CEO of the Kingston Economic Development Corporation, said he was “shocked and horrified” to find out that the offshore project in his area was suddenly on hold.

“We’ve worked with various offshore supporters for about a year,” he said, adding the overall loss is about 1,900 jobs in five years.

“This sends a distorted message to outside investors in Ontario when a company is offered a contract, Windstream, and the province reneges on it.”

Gideon Forman, the executive director of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, said the move is a bit of a setback but not a fatal blow for wind power.

“We don’t think it’ll fundamentally change anything,” he said. “We knew there was a five-kilometre setback with offshore projects but we didn’t think they’d scrap the whole thing. This seemed to come out of nowhere.”

What is important is the continued Liberal commitment to onshore wind projects and the phaseout of coal-fired plants, he added.

“The key thing for protecting human health for us is phasing out coal,” he said.

With files from Robert Benzie and Rob Ferguson