

## **Liberals yank offshore wind power**

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QMI Agency file photo

Dalton McGuinty has abruptly pulled the plug on offshore wind farms, his opponents accusing him of an election-year flip-flop.

Three McGuinty lieutenants announced the reversal Friday and fielded a flurry of questions - QMI Agency asked to interview the premier but was redirected to the ministers of energy, environment and natural resources.

"Offshore wind on freshwater lakes is a recent concept that requires a cautious approach until the science of environmental impact is clear,"

Environment Minister John Wilkinson said.

The about-face drew hackles from opponents at Queen's Park, where the announcement came on a day the legislature sat empty, and in the provincial heartland who've fought the use of heavily-subsidized wind power.

"Their energy policy is written on the back of a napkin . . . They don't know what they are doing," John LaForet, leader of a grassroots opposition with members in dozens of Ontario towns and hamlets, said of the Liberal government.

Conservative energy critic John Yakabuski said claims of science behind the sudden reversal are fiction.

"Look, it's politics. If they think it's going to move the voters in their direction, they'll do it," he said.

Ontario Energy Minister Brad Duguid, who's been McGuinty's front man on green energy, defended his government, denounced the Tory opposition and dismissed claims Ontario's October election had anything to do with what he described as a pause in offshore wind development.

"Show me a government who has shown more courage and leadership in moving forward in transitioning our energy system from the one we inherited that was dirty, unreliable and out-dated," he said.

No one questions the Liberal green energy plan was ambitious in calling for the use of renewable energy to grow from 3 to 13% by 2018 - critics questioned its costs and fallout on the environment and human health.

But the government's plans for offshore wind have been spinning, first welcoming applications, then imposing a moratorium in 2006, then lifting that moratorium in 2008.

"You can't trust this government," New Democrat Leader Andrea Horwath said.

"It's really obvious that the controversy around the wind projects is making the government twist in the wind."

Wilkinson said it was science, not politics, that was the driving force - that there are no wind farms in fresh water and not enough evidence to know if they harm the environment, or are vulnerable to Great Lakes freezing.

Data on environmental impact from the United States and Sweden must be collected and reviewed, he said.

"Can these be constructed without negatively impacting the environment? We don't have the science to draw from to make that determination," said Wilkinson, the Perth-Wellington MPP.

Just how much science the Liberal government already has in hand isn't clear. In 2008, when it lifted the first moratorium, it did so claiming to have analyzed the ecology of the Great Lakes, developed guidelines to protect birds and bats and partnered with others to further study the effect of turbines.

At the time, then-natural resources minister Donna Cansfield said, "The information we have acquired will help us and wind developers make better-informed decisions on offshore wind power projects."

Duguid was asked Friday if his government erred by lifting an earlier moratorium, only to impose another.

"We needed to move quickly (in 2008) if we were going to make Ontario a leader in green energy," he said.

That leadership as it applies to offshore wind has been lost, said a lobby group for Canada's wind industry.

"This is an unfortunate decision that surrenders the province's leadership role in exploring the potential for offshore wind energy in the Great Lakes and creates significant uncertainty for investors," said Robert Hornung, president of the Canadian Wind Energy Association.

Several U.S. states are investigating offshore wind, New York is preparing a pilot project, and Ontario runs the risk of falling behind, he said.

"Investors will go to the jurisdiction providing clarity and certainty going forward," Hornung said.

A 2008 report prepared by an energy company for the Ontario Power Authority (OPA), an agency tasked by the province with finding new sources of energy, found 20 sites in the lakes around Ontario that could support 160 turbines each, and more than 40 smaller sites.

Energy companies have applied to develop offshore wind farms in Lakes Huron, Ontario and Erie, enraging many cottagers in those districts.

Concerns by the wind industry were dismissed by Duguid, who said the province will reach its renewable energy targets with or without offshore wind.

Only one offshore wind project was among the 1,300 given the go-ahead so far under Ontario's Green Energy Act.

"It's very miniscule," Duguid said.

But Hornung said the lack of approved applications shouldn't be confused with a lack of interest by the wind industry. Energy companies have already invested to explore potential sites and lease land.

"It certainly is not an insignificant (interest) in offshore," he said.

Applications haven't been pursued because the province hadn't yet settled on key rules, such as how far from shore the wind farms must be - the Environment Ministry proposed a 5-km buffer.

One political observer dismissed as unlikely the notion the change on offshore wind was politically motivated. Nelson Wiseman, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, says offshore wind farms are just too far off the political radar.

"It's not going to be a big issue in the election," he said.

Duguid expects it'll take about two years to gather enough science on offshore wind to lift the moratorium.