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Corps to release Draft EIS on proposed wind energy project in Nantucket Sound

CONCORD, Mass. – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District will release on Tuesday, Nov. 9 the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)/Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) on the proposed Cape Wind wind energy project in Nantucket Sound, Mass.

The Draft EIS/EIR was prepared by the Corps, in cooperation with 16 federal, state and local resource agencies, in response to a permit application from Cape Wind Associates, LLC for the installation and operation of 130 offshore wind turbine generators in Nantucket Sound, Mass.

“After 34 months of intensive analysis and research, the Corps of Engineers has completed an objective document that is about 4,000 pages long that will provide the public with an opportunity to make an informed decision on this wind energy proposal,” said District Engineer Col. Thomas Koning, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District. “The purpose of the Draft EIS/EIR is to assess the environmental impacts associated with the proposed construction of an offshore wind-powered generating facility by Cape Wind Associates in Nantucket Sound.”

The Draft EIS/EIR draws few conclusions but provides detailed information on the potential impacts and benefits of the applicant’s proposed wind energy project in Nantucket Sound and potential impacts and benefits at the alternative sites.

“The Draft EIS/EIR is four volumes and almost 4,000 pages,” Koning said. “The Corps of Engineers now encourages the public, groups and agencies to comment on the Draft EIS during a 60 day public review period.”

Cape Wind Associates LLC applied to the Corps for a permit to construct an offshore wind energy facility in November 2001. The purpose is to generate up to 454 MW of clean, renewable wind-generated energy that will be transmitted to the New England regional power grid, including Cape Cod and the Islands. The proposed wind turbines would be up to 420 feet high with the hub height approximately 260 feet above the water surface.

“The Draft EIS/EIR document is intended to fulfill the regional, state and federal environmental assessment requirements,” said Cape Wind Energy Project EIS Manager Karen K. Adams, with the Corps’ New England District, Regulatory Division.

The northernmost turbines would be more than 4 miles from Yarmouth, the southeastern most turbines would be about 11 miles from Nantucket, and the westernmost turbines would be about 5.5 miles from Martha’s Vineyard.

“The Draft EIS/EIR is a compilation of information, analysis and studies addressing the most relevant potential impacts and public interest factors that were listed in the EIS scope of work which we developed from the public comments received during the spring of 2002,” Adams said.

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The Draft EIS includes an executive summary, an explanation of purpose and need, the alternatives analysis, the affected environment and environmental consequences, a list of preparers, public involvement documentation, a list of cooperating agencies, an acronym list, an index and many technical appendices.

Based on the EIS scope of work developed in 2002, the environmental and public interest factors addressed in the Draft EIS include: geology; physical oceanography; benthic and shellfish resources; finfish and commercial/recreational fisheries; protected marine species; terrestrial ecology, wildlife, and protected species; avian resources; coastal and freshwater wetland resources; water quality; cultural and recreational resources/visual; noise; transportation and navigation; electrical and magnetic fields; telecommunications systems; air and climate; and socioeconomics.

“The Corps has been working closely with federal, state and local agencies, and the public in developing the Draft EIS,” Koning said. “Through the scoping hearings and public meetings since the spring of 2002, 17 sites were identified by the public and cooperating agencies as possible alternatives.”

Five screening criteria were used to evaluate those alternatives: availability of renewable energy (i.e. wind power classification); ISO New England grid connection availability (connection point, transmission/distribution lines, efficiency/capacity); available land or water area; engineering constraints (constructability, geotechnical conditions, water depths); and legal/regulatory constraints (i.e. endangered species, shipping channels, etc.).

“Working with the cooperating agencies, the Corps determined it needed to take a more flexible, subjective approach to developing representative sites for the alternative analysis,” Koning said. “A strict pass/fail screening process would not work. The National Environmental Policy Act allows the Corps to limit alternatives to a reasonable number so that the EIS can compare the alternatives. We narrowed that list of 17 sites to four alternatives using these screening criteria.

“The Draft EIS/EIR now evaluates and compares those sites to provide a better understanding of what a proposed wind energy project will mean to the region,” Koning said.

The Corps, with cooperating agency consultation, determined reasonable sites that cover the spectrum of: 1) Shallow water off-shore site; 2) Deeper water off-shore site; 3) On-shore site; 4) Two or more smaller sites combined to achieve the intended purpose and need.

“Using that flexible concept, the Corps selected four alternatives that were carried forward for more detailed review in the wind energy project EIS,” Koning said.

The onshore alternative is MMR – the Massachusetts Military Reservation in Bourne on Cape Cod, Mass.; the shallow water alternative included three possible configurations – the applicant’s preferred alternative of Horseshoe Shoal, and also Tuckernuck Shoal, and Hankerchief Shoal, Mass.; and the combined locations are New Bedford Harbor, Mass., and a reduced footprint at Horseshoe Shoal. The area south of Tuckernuck Island, Mass., is the deeper-water site.

“Using representative samples gave us a basis for comparison,” Koning said. “We were better able to determine what the relative merits were of each type of alternative site. This process ensured that we did what was required in accordance with the intent of NEPA and for the public interest determination of this wind energy project review as required by our regulations.”

The next step in the environmental review process will be that the general public will review the Draft EIS and provide their comments and concerns to the Corps.

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Public hearings are scheduled: on Monday, Dec. 6 at 6 p.m. (registration to begin at 5 p.m.) at the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School on Edgartown Road, in Oak Bluffs, Mass.; on Tuesday, Dec. 7 at 7 p.m. (registration to begin at 6 p.m.) at the Mattacheese Middle School at 400 Higgins-Crowell Road in West Yarmouth, Mass.; on Wednesday, Dec. 8 at 6 p.m. (registration to begin at 5 p.m.) at the Nantucket Community School at 10 Surfside Road in the Mary P. Walker Auditorium in Nantucket, Mass.; and on Thursday, Dec. 16 at 7 p.m. (registration to begin at 6 p.m.) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Room 10-250 at 77 Massachusetts Ave. in Cambridge, Mass.

"The Corps of Engineers will carefully consider all comments received on the Draft EIS," Adams said. These comments and concerns will be reviewed, analyzed and addressed and that will lead to the Final EIS scheduled to be completed in 2005.

Following review and input the Corps will prepare a Final EIS. When the Final EIS is completed, 30 days later the Corps can prepare a Record of Decision (ROD). The ROD documents the results of the NEPA process.

The Corps can then make a determination on whether to issue a permit, permit with special conditions or deny a permit to Cape Wind on its proposed wind energy project.

"If we stay on the current schedule, we anticipate that the Final EIS will be completed in mid-2005," Adams said. "It takes about six months after the comment period of the Draft EIS to complete the Final EIS. Completion will really depend on all the issues and concerns presented during the public comment period on the Draft EIS. These issues and concerns will be reviewed and addressed in the Final EIS."

Hard copies and CD copies of the Draft EIS are available for review at 32 local area libraries on Cape Cod and in Boston, Mass.

An electronic version of the Draft EIS is available for review and download on the Corps website at <http://www.nae.usace.army.mil>. Select "projects" and then Cape Wind windfarm permit application. Or go directly to: <http://www.nae.usace.army.mil/projects/ma/ccwf/deis.htm> Public comments on the Draft EIS can be sent electronically to wind.energy@usace.army.mil or mailed to Cape Wind Energy Project EIS Manager Karen K. Adams, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District, Regulatory Division, 696 Virginia Road, Concord, MA 01742-2751. Reference file # NAE-2004-338-1. The public notice with plans and descriptions can be reviewed online at the Corps website <http://www.nae.usace.army.mil>. Select Regulatory/Permitting and search by file number or state.

A compact disc (CD) copy of the Draft EIS and a Project Summary Brochure can be requested from the above address or by calling 978-318-8338.