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New offshore wind farms could power every UK home

Eifion Rees

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The findings of a strategic environmental assessment open the way for an increase in the number of offshore wind farms, which could produce enough energy to power every household in the UK

Capitalising on its reputation as the windiest country in Europe, the UK is to adopt a plan that could see the energy output from offshore wind farms more than triple.

The findings of a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) on offshore energy suggest that UK waters can accommodate enough turbines to generate a further 25 gigawatts (GW) of power on top of the 8GW already built or planned – enough to theoretically power every household in the UK.

Energy minister Lord Hunt made the [announcement](#) at the British Wind Energy Association Offshore Wind Conference in Westminster yesterday, saying that the expansion could provide the UK with 700,000 new jobs and £8 billion in annual revenue.

'Offshore wind is fundamental to delivering our target of 15 per cent renewable energy by 2020, and looking ahead to reducing our carbon emissions by 80 per cent,' he said.

'[The Government's] decision is that we have adopted a plan for some 25GW of additional capacity in the territorial waters of England and Wales and the UK Renewable Energy Zone, in water depths up to 60m. I have, this morning, placed a written statement in Parliament to this effect.'

Adopting the SEA plan for additional capacity allows the Crown Estate, which legally owns the UK's coastal waters, to proceed with a third round of leasing in UK waters, opening up 11 more offshore sites that have the potential to accommodate wind farms.

Lord Hunt also announced the beginning of the tendering process for the £15 billion of investment in a new offshore grid to connect the turbines to the national grid.

Friends of the Earth (FoE) welcomed the announcement, but called for the rapid development of the offshore super-grid and its connection to a wider European network.

'With this new round of investment, offshore wind could supply 25 per cent of the UK's electricity demand,' said FoE energy campaigner Nick Rau. 'Boosting offshore wind power will make the UK a world-leader in building a clean and prosperous low-carbon economy – we must urgently tackle the barriers that prevent wind energy from really taking off.'

The energy potential of land-based wind power has also been underlined by new research from the US, where scientists have calculated that a global network of 2.5MW turbines could comfortably meet the world's energy needs – even if operating at 20 per cent of their capacity.



UK capacity for offshore wind farms could provide energy - enough to power every home in the country

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The team from Harvard divided the world into areas of 3,300 square kilometres, identified suitable areas outside urban centres and factored in variables such as the spacing of turbines, rotor size, wind speed and air density.

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'The analysis suggests that a network of land-based 2.5 megawatt turbines operating at as little as 20 per cent of rated capacity, confined to non-forested, ice-free regions would be more than sufficient to account for total current and anticipated future global demand for electricity,' said lead researcher Professor Michael McElroy. 'The potential for the contiguous US could amount to more than 16 times current consumption. Important additional sources of electricity could be obtained by deploying wind farms in near-shore shallow water environments.'

Meanwhile the timetable and costs of wind expansion have been laid out in two new reports from the BWEA. [UK Offshore Wind: Staying on track](#), and [Offshore Wind: Charting the right course](#), were launched at the Offshore 09 conference in Westminster.

'The report on offshore build-out predicts that we will have a cumulative installed capacity of up to nine gigawatts by 2015,' said BWEA chief executive Maria McCaffery. 'That these predictions are credible are shown by our report from 2007, which accurately predicted the point at which we are today. Wind will overtake nuclear in terms of installed capacity within the next four to five years, as an important milestone in reaching 2020.'

The costs report indicates that costs will be pushed down if there are three to four manufacturers in the offshore market, and predicts a price-fall of some 20 per cent if a deployment of 4-5GW is achieved every year in Europe. It currently costs £3.1 million per MW.

'Round three is set to deliver the UK portion of this capacity and the Government must pull out all the stops to accommodate this programme,' McCaffery said.

While most people now acknowledge the environmental and financial benefits of wind farms (climate change secretary Ed Miliband recently said opposing them should be 'socially taboo') it seems one executive at PR firm Weber Shandwick didn't get the memo.

Chair of public affairs Jonathan McLeod has formed the National Alliance of Wind Farm Action Groups (NAWAG) in a bid to prevent developers 'forc[ing] turbines on communities' – despite the fact that his company represents wind energy firm Viking Energy.

'For too long, the "greenwash" of the wind industry has gone unchallenged,' he wrote, launching the campaign in an email from his Weber Shandwick email address. The company is currently providing PR for Viking Energy's proposed 150-turbine, 540MW wind farm in the Shetland Isles, which it is hoped will provide 20 per cent of Scotland's energy requirements and 12 per cent of its renewable energy target by 2020.

Spurred to take action by the construction of wind farms near his Derbyshire home, McLeod told [New Energy Focus](#) that NAWAG was a 'personal initiative' that presented no conflict of interest. He was not involved with the Viking Energy account, he said, adding that 'inevitably' not all Weber Shandwick staff agreed with the stances of its clients.

As chairman of the newly formed group of 30 anti-wind-farm organisations, McLeod will lead NAWAG in lobbying the Conservative party on the issue.

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