

# This northeast NC wind farm has a chance

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## IBERDROLA RENEWABLES

Iberdrola's turbines on the N.C. coast would look like these.

BY JOHN MURAWSKI - Staff Writer

A proposal to build a 300-megawatt wind energy farm in the northeast corner of North Carolina has so far cleared a major milestone that has long eluded wind power in this state: It has generated no organized opposition.

Indeed, the lack of controversy prompted the N.C. Utilities Commission to cancel a portion of today's public hearings in Raleigh that had been set aside to hear expert testimony from accountants and engineers.

Instead, the commission will hear from citizens about the proposal to erect up to 150 turbines, each structure nearly 500 feet tall from ground level to outstretched blade tip, on 31 square miles of farmland.

The \$600 million Desert Wind Energy Project near Elizabeth City in Pasquotank and Perquimans counties would be the state's first commercial-scale wind farm and one of the biggest in the nation. It would generate enough electricity to power between 55,000 and 70,000 homes.

Much smaller proposals in this state had been withdrawn in recent years, facing contentious opposition campaigns and public protests. The state legislature attempted to ban large-scale wind projects in the Appalachian Mountains, and coastal Carteret County enacted a moratorium on wind turbines.

Now, after two years of planning, the sprawling Desert Wind Energy Project is still alive and pending before a dozen government agencies, but it has yet to receive its first permit from federal, state or local authorities.

Construction, which would take nearly a year, would employ more than 400 workers, and the project would be operated and maintained by a crew of about 20, earning an average annual wage of \$80,000.

Iberdrola, the Spanish company that's proposing to develop the wind farm, has built more than 40 large wind farms in the U.S. over the past decade. Coastal North Carolina is considered to have some of the choicest wind resources on the East Coast, and Iberdrola is considering other parts of the state for development potential if it can successfully develop its Desert Wind project.

"North Carolina, in particular the area where we're looking, meets the criteria we look for in any project," said Iberdrola spokesman Paul Copleman. "People haven't seen these before, they're new to the state, and that inevitably raises questions on what it means to operate a wind farm."

Not a tourist in sight

Iberdrola, the world's largest wind developer, first set up wind monitors in 2009 to test wind speeds. It has held community meetings and participated in public hearings.

Unlike previous wind farm developers, Iberdrola has stayed clear of tourist areas and focused on sparsely populated tracts. The scrubland identified for the proposed wind farm is locally known as The Desert.

"If you drive out there you would think you were in Kansas," said Wayne Harris, director of the region's Albemarle Economic Development Commission. "It's just absolutely flat, and there's nothing but farmland."

The company, operating in the U.S. through its Oregon-based subsidiary called Atlantic Wind, expects to spend the rest of the year seeking approval from a half-dozen N.C. agencies, including the N.C. Utilities Commission and the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Plus, Iberdrola has to get clearance from a pair of federal agencies as well as three branches of the U.S. armed forces.

Iberdrola will have to assure authorities the giant wind turbines don't interfere with wildlife habitats, bird migration patterns or military flight routes, among other concerns.

The Iberdrola project would benefit from a federal cash grant that would cover 30 percent of the cost. At the earliest, construction would begin late this year and be completed at the end of 2012.

A boon to farmers

Iberdrola does not yet have customers lined up to buy the electricity it plans to generate, but the company is in discussions with Progress Energy, Duke Energy and other regional power suppliers for possible long-term power contracts. The utilities are all required by state law to buy renewable electricity generated by wind, sunshine and agricultural waste.

"Our initial assessment is that the project is economically viable and would provide renewable energy for our customers at a competitive price," Progress spokesman Mike Hughes said.

Among those benefiting from the project will be farmers who allow Iberdrola to erect the towers on their property. Each tower will generate about \$6,000 in annual rental income for the property owner, and the farmers will be able to continue working their land around the structures.

"For the farmers, these wind farms are a tremendous windfall," Harris said.

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