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Company plans test of wave energy  
From Register-Guard  
and news service reports  
Published: Sunday, May 13, 2007

The potential for ocean waves to generate electricity will get its first test in Oregon this summer when an Irish company installs a single experimental buoy that it hopes will lead to approval of a much larger electric generation project off the coast of Bandon.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approved the test, among the first of its kind, on April 30. It will allow Finavera Renewables, Inc., to begin analyzing the environmental and economic impact of its proposed system of buoys to harness the energy of waves to generate electricity off the coast of Oregon.

Finavera, an Irish company, has been working with researchers at Oregon State University to develop what it calls AquaBuOY wave energy devices.

If the plan works out, company officials want to build a project off the coast of Bandon that could have a generating capacity of 100 megawatts, enough to power 15,000 homes.

Although plans are very preliminary, the project may fit into an area between two and three square miles. Environmental studies must be produced to look at the impacts on fisheries, ocean mammals, commercial and recreational uses, visual impacts and other uses of the ocean in the area just north of the border of Coos and Curry counties, company officials said.

The company also is developing wave generation projects in Portugal, South Africa and Canada.

"This project is designed to meet the State of Oregon's policy to invest in and support the growth of clean and renewable energy sources for the people of Oregon," said Alla Weinstein, who directs ocean projects for Finavera. "The Coos County project is part of the next step along our path to the commercialization of wave energy."

Whether wave-generated electricity is cheaper than power generated by the Bonneville Power Administration is yet to be determined. However, OSU researchers have been working with the company to improve the efficiency of buoys that harness the motion of waves to move coils of copper wire along a magnetic field to generate electricity.

Engineers say the powerful waves of the Oregon Coast are ideal for testing the concept. OSU scientists calculate that just 0.2 percent of the untapped energy of the world's oceans would meet the entire planet's power needs.

The preliminary permit is "good news for the industry and good news for Finavera. We need to get projects into the water," said Sean O'Neill, president of the Ocean Renewable Energy Coalition, a trade association based in Darnestown, Md., near Washington, D.C.

Despite their potential to provide a renewable supply of electricity, wave energy projects in the United States are still years from providing commercial power, said Roger Bedard, of the Electrical Power Research Institute in Palo Alto, Calif.

The federal permit gives Finavera and its associates one year to propose myriad studies to help meet the complex state and U.S. regulations.

The next major step will be stationing a single experimental buoy off Newport, 122 miles north of Bandon, sometime this summer, Finavera officials said.

After that, Bedard said, the company can expect to spend a year getting approval for a range of environmental and economic impact studies, two years to conduct them, and then FERC can take up to two years to weigh the application for Finavera to actually deploy the buoy network.

"And it will take another year to get real hardware in the water. We're talking seven years to put it in the water," Bedard said.

Bedard and O'Neill advocate a more streamlined process for licensing ocean energy.

"For me it is the right thing for our country to do," said Bedard. "We can have clean, renewable energy."

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