

[Print Article](#)[Print This Story](#)

Coastal wind power

JOURNAL EDITORIAL STAFF

North Carolina is wisely dipping only its big toe into coastal wind power.

The state, UNC and Duke Energy are planning to build as many as three enormous wind turbines in Pamlico Sound, between the mainland and the Outer Banks. If all goes well, the \$36 million project could begin sending power into the electrical grid by this time next year.

Only a few places in the world rival North Carolina's potential for wind power. But few places rival the beauty of our mountains and coast, too. So we must move cautiously in this area.

For the time being, development of mountain wind farms appears to be stalled. State law designed to protect the state's ridge-line vistas pretty much blocks out wind turbines.

But along the coast, the environmental situation is very different, and the three-party trial program has enormous potential. The U.S. Energy Department says that the state's coastline represents a gold mine for energy production. A UNC Chapel Hill study indicates that, fully tapped, wind power could provide 30 percent more energy than the state used in 2007. And, by 2030, the university found, wind energy could create 9,000 jobs in the state.

Coastal wind turbines raise environmental concerns of several kinds. The first is visual. These towers rise 465 feet into the air. But they will also be so far offshore that only their tops will be visible -- even when they are in the sound. The researchers recommended using an eastern section of Pamlico Sound, seven to 10 miles from Avon or Hatteras, for the demonstration project. When off the coast, they might not be visible at all from land and so should not harm tourism.

More serious is the potential harm that wind turbines can do to the seabed. Miles of expensive cable will run along the seabed to the shore. Seabeds are delicate ecosystems and must be protected.

Once the power lines reach the shore, there is the potential for undesirable industrial development on the coast. This is one of the big problems that offshore-oil and natural-gas drilling poses. If North Carolina is to see jobs created, private companies will have to develop onshore facilities. The big question remains where those facilities would pose the least-serious environmental risk.

It may well be that a Pamlico Sound wind farm would be both less expensive and less environmentally hazardous. Cables probably would have a shorter run, and they could be routed to come ashore on the less-vulnerable mainland.

The pilot project will give us answers to these questions and more.

If all works well, using the state's wind resources could offer one of those rare opportunities to both create major economic opportunities and protect the environment. The Pamlico project appears to offer a good way to test the ideas and get answers.