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Community Wind - Small projects chip at Bay State target

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Massachusetts' wind power future may be offshore, but community-owned projects are creating a small flurry of onshore development.

This is good news for a state with only 15MW online but a renewable energy law calling for 15% in renewables by 2020. Last year 11 projects, of one or two turbines, were installed, adding 9MW capacity. This year could see another handful of projects and another 20MW if the long-awaited ten-turbine 15MW Berkshire municipal wind farm comes online.

In January the Mass. Clean Energy Center (MCEC) awarded \$2.5 million in grants across 20 small projects - six totalling 12MW for construction - along with 14 feasibility studies that could spawn another 13MW. The next round of grants is scheduled for spring.

"We'll have an ongoing stream of good projects that will get developed," said Phil Giudice, energy resources commissioner for the Mass. Department of Energy. Giudice cites population density and lack of windy open spaces as barriers to big commercial projects in Mass. "We've got some of the best resources in the world for offshore wind," he says. "But it's going to be handfuls of turbines here and there onshore."

That sounds good to Kevin Schulte, CEO of Sustainable Energy Developments (SED). The developer of community-owned wind has built seven single-turbine projects in the Bay State with more on the way.

The company has leveraged MCEC grants, funded through monthly ratepayer electricity bills, which can reach up to \$400,000. Skittish financial markets mean investors are keen to test the water with a \$4 million project rather than \$40 million, especially when connected to a municipality. "We're experiencing a lot of new capital coming into the market," Schulte says. "Some days you just wouldn't know we're in a recession unless you read the news."

Turbines are easy to come by and often chosen with service and maintenance in mind, while gaining construction permits is usually relatively simple for community-based wind. Transmission is rarely, if ever, a factor. "I think I'm pretty safe in saying that there's not a wind project built in Mass. that's interconnected to a transmission line," Schulte says. "They're all interconnected at the distribution level, which carries with it a very different transmission dynamic than the ones that normally face wind projects." Small wind projects can connect easily into small pockets of the electricity grid without substantial accommodations or reinforcements.

Meanwhile, Mass. continues to attract businesses in the wind supply chain. The US Department of Energy's new blade-testing facility is under construction. Vestas is opening a research and development office. American Superconductor is working on a 10MW turbine. Vermont-based turbine manufacturer Northern Power Systems recently opened an office.

And state governor Deval Patrick has set an arbitrary wind power goal of 2GW by 2020. "A lot of great things are happening in Mass. for wind," said Giudice.

To reach Patrick's goal, the Cape Wind project will have to deliver its planned 420MW and other offshore mega-projects must follow suit. But community-owned onshore projects continue to chip away at the target. "Community wind is really the onshore option," Schulte says. "If we get the support of Cape Wind and some of the other large offshore projects that are being envisioned, there's a real chance of hitting that 20% of the power in Mass. It's a real neat market. It's a different dynamic than most of the country."

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