

My Word: For North Coast economic recovery, look to offshore wind

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As Californians hunker down during the current COVID-19 crisis, it's worth remembering an uncomfortable truth: Climate change presents a global threat of much more wide-scale and long-term impact. Sea levels may not be rising as suddenly as coronavirus is spreading, but in both crises, we need leadership, planning, and — most important — action.

The governor's new economic recovery task force, which is looking for ways to jumpstart the state's cratering economy, would do well to combine this task with helping the state meet its ambitious goals for fighting climate change. One of the answers on both counts is to move forward on developing offshore wind power.

California has long been a world leader in renewable energy, investing in wind, solar, and other renewables to create an energy system that is 40 percent cleaner than it was a decade ago. The state hit its 2020 carbon emissions goals early, created tens of thousands of green jobs, and helped spur the global fight against climate change.

But that was the easy part. New studies show California may fall short of its climate targets in coming years unless it can find ways to nearly double the past decade of emissions reductions. The state's long-term goals, including transitioning to 100 percent clean energy by 2045, will be even more challenging to achieve and will require up to six times more renewable energy than used today.

A key way to resolve this is to harness the steady winds blowing across the Pacific, which have the energy potential to supply almost a third of the state's total energy use during peak demand periods.

The federal and state governments have determined offshore wind power generation to be a viable option, and have identified optimal sites off the North Coast and near Morro Bay. What's needed now is for the state to jumpstart the industry and provide funding to prepare ports, the workforce, and transmission system.

Offshore wind means jobs — lots of them: Tapping 10 gigawatts of energy off the coast would generate an extensive supply chain in manufacturing, assembly, installation, operations and maintenance of the new wind farms. This would create 15,000 or more green jobs, many of them in regions that now lack well paying economic opportunities. It would require a highly skilled and trained workforce in the building, construction, and maritime trades — which the existing, well-developed system of state-certified apprenticeship programs is well suited to provide. These skill sets are highly transferrable, which means they can serve other industries in construction, manufacturing, and port and marine services.

Offshore wind should be prioritized for state and federal economic stimulus funding in several ways:

Ports: These will be the mother lode of jobs and economic creation. The state needs to spur work to plan and develop seaport facilities, especially at the spectacularly sited wasteland at the Port of Humboldt Bay. That site is ripe for industrial rebirth: hundreds of acres of unused docks and empty industrial buildings at a deep-water anchorage, all abandoned by the region's once-powerful lumber and pulp industries.

Transmission: Offshore power will be able to reuse transmission nodes such as at the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, scheduled to be mothballed in 2025. But for starters, upgrades should be made to the Humboldt County regional electrical transmission system to support the state's initial wind farms off the North Coast.

Environmental impact: While much important research has been done to analyze the potential impacts of offshore wind development on fish, marine mammals and seabirds, more work is done to assess these impacts and design mitigation strategies.

Goals: Because wind energy companies need certainty to be able to invest billions of dollars in California, the state needs to provide overall policy guidance by adopting targets for development of California wind, such as 10 gigawatts by 2040.

Support for offshore wind infrastructure would be an ideal complement of any economic stimulus package.

Gov. Newsom often speaks optimistically about making investments in the future of work that will restore the "California Dream" — allowing the state to serve, as it did in years past, as a manufacturing hub for the world, with good jobs, high wages, and a strong middle class.

California's economic recovery task force should look to offshore wind as one of our best chances to return to that — allowing the state to build a new manufacturing base, a new skilled and trained workforce, and a new industry that can supply energy and technological components across the entire Pacific Rim.

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