

New York's Wind Power Future Is Taking Shape. In Rhode Island.

Much of the initial work required to build the first ocean turbines that will deliver power to New Yorkers is being done elsewhere.



By Patrick McGeehan

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — When Gov. Kathy Hochul laid out her plan for accelerating the development of New York's offshore wind industry a year ago, she promised thousands of jobs for state residents.

Today, New York's first wind farm in the Atlantic Ocean is under construction. Crews in hard hats are assembling platforms for giant turbines and building boats that will ferry technicians onto the water to ensure the massive blades keep rotating.

But the work is not being done in New York. It is happening more than 150 miles away in Rhode Island.

States and cities all along the East Coast are vying with New York to be hubs for the fast-growing business of harnessing wind power offshore. But Rhode Island took the lead by building the first offshore wind farm in the United States several years ago. Centrally located among projects planned from New York to Massachusetts, the nation's smallest state has held on to many of the jobs and economic benefits that go with being first.

"Everybody wants to think they're at the forefront, that they're the leader," said Michael F. Sabitoni, the president of the Rhode Island Building and Construction Trades Council. "You can print this: Rhode Island's the leader."

New York has more offshore wind projects in the works than any other state, according to the state authority that oversees them. But its ambitious plans and most of the jobs they would create are at least a few years off.

The most advanced of the projects, South Fork Wind, is expected to be the first offshore site to supply electricity to New York.



South Fork, 35 miles east of the tip of Long Island, is scheduled to start operating late this year. The 132 megawatts of electricity it is expected to produce — enough to power about 70,000 homes — will run through 60 miles of cables under the sea to a substation in East Hampton.

For the past six years, the only offshore wind farm producing electricity for American consumers has been the small Block Island Wind Farm, about 16 miles off the Rhode Island coast. Consisting of five turbines capable of producing six megawatts of power each, it is the successful model on which many larger hopes have been pinned.

Six years after the Block Island farm was plugged into New England's power grid, a mad rush is on to build several much larger wind farms along the East Coast. In 2021, President Biden set a goal of deploying 30 gigawatts of offshore wind power by 2030 — enough, he said, to power 10 million American homes.

To that end, states have set their own ambitious goals. Ms. Hochul has called for New York to produce nine gigawatts — a gigawatt is equal to 1,000 megawatts — of offshore wind power by 2035. A group of environmental advocates and union leaders have pushed her to go further, calling for 15 gigawatts by 2040 and 20 by 2050.

So far, there are plans for four more wind farms that would provide power to New York over the next five years. The main base of operations for those projects will be the South Brooklyn Marine Terminal. Last month, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority accepted bids for another wind farm off the Long Island coast.

Kate Muller, an authority spokeswoman, said New York had more offshore projects in the works than any other state and was developing five ports to support them. The authority estimates that offshore wind will produce 10,000 jobs in New York by 2035. As is typical, there will be more jobs during the building phase than during operations.

But the first one, South Fork, has not yet been built. And its completion and operation rely on hundreds of workers toiling in factories in Rhode Island, like the crew Chris Petit oversees.



Workers at Blount Boats in Warren, R.I., building vessels that will carry workers to perform maintenance on the turbines after they are installed. James Estrin/The New York Times

Mr. Petit, the shipyard superintendent for Blount Boats in Warren, R.I., is leading a team of 45 laborers who are welding together the shiny aluminum parts of a 99-foot-long catamaran that will carry workers to the South Fork turbines.

The South Fork project is a joint venture between Orsted, a Danish company that is one of the world's biggest developers of offshore wind power, and Eversource, a large New England utility.

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Orsted has set up operations on the Providence waterfront to make components for three proposed wind farms, and on a Monday afternoon in late January, workers were ankle-deep in wet concrete, shaping a circular platform designed to fit around one of South Fork's 12 turbines. In an adjacent building, constructed for making turbine parts, other workers assembled internal platforms needed to transform wind into high-voltage electricity.

The companies have made big investments in Rhode Island and elsewhere in New England to foster an industry that can build the South Fork project and others like it, including Sunrise Wind, which is to be New York's second offshore wind farm.

They built the construction hub for components at ProvPort in Providence, where 80 members of Local 271 are making the platforms for South Fork and other wind farms. Mr. Sabitoni said he expected his union's employment there to rise to about 120 workers.



The vessels being built at Blount Boats will have bows specially designed to dock against turbine towers in rough seas. James Estrin/The New York Times

"This industry is getting ready and I do expect it to really blossom," Mr. Sabitoni said.

At another Rhode Island port, Quonset Point in North Kingstown, Senesco Marine is building more boats for transferring crews to South Fork and other offshore sites.

"There's really not enough qualified yards in New York and New Jersey" to build those boats now, said Josh Diedrich, the managing director of WindServe Marine, the offshore wind division of Staten Island-based Reinauer Transportation.

Space at deepwater ports along the East Coast is also at a premium. That is why sometime this summer, the components for the South Fork turbines, including blades that are 300 feet long, will be delivered to the State Pier in New London, Conn.

More than 150 workers in New London are racing to complete a \$255 million project, paid for by Connecticut and the joint venture between Orsted and Eversource, to create a site suitable for the final assembly of the turbines before they are lifted onto barges and hauled out to sea.

New London is slated to serve as the marshaling port for Sunrise Wind, as well. The assembly work is expected to involve about 100 union laborers during the developers' 10-year lease.

New York is not the only state playing catch-up to meet its offshore wind goals. Last fall, Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey doubled the state's target for offshore wind power to 11 gigawatts by 2040.

Two factories that would make the steel tubes that will be driven into the seabed to support the ocean turbines are being built at a port in Paulsboro, N.J. But until domestic facilities like those are up and running, many of the largest components of the first commercial wind farms in America will come from overseas.

Some executives in the offshore wind industry said the center of gravity was likely to shift toward New York City as work begins on the bigger wind farms planned for the waters off the East Coast.

Already, much of the work has been done by union construction crews on Long Island to prepare for connection of the power to be supplied by South Fork. Workers hired in New York boarded a ship in Providence that picked up a thick cable at a new factory in South Carolina and will bury it under the sea from the Hamptons to the wind farm, said Allison Ziogas, Orsted's U.S. labor relations manager. Other New Yorker workers, hired to maintain South Fork's turbines, are in England, training at a wind farm on the North Sea, she said.

Orsted is also building a base in Port Jefferson on Long Island's North Shore to maintain and operate the South Fork farm once it is in service, said David Hardy, the chief executive of Orsted Americas, whose headquarters are split between Boston and Providence.

"Those are the long-term jobs, they're 30-, 35-year jobs," Mr. Hardy said.

General Electric said in January that if it received enough orders from developers of New York wind farms, it would build two factories south of Albany: one to make blades for offshore turbines and one to make housings for generating components. The company said the factories would produce about 1,000 construction jobs and about 870 longer-term jobs.

Jeff Tingley, managing partner with OSWind Partners, a consulting firm in Providence, said it was probably inevitable that Rhode Island's moment as a major hub for offshore wind would be relatively short-lived.

"Small states are at a disadvantage," Mr. Tingley said. "If you're a big state like New York or New Jersey, you've got 20 or 30 years of employment ahead of you. It's a generational thing."