

6. POLITICS: New Web site blames environmental groups and others for stalled energy projects (03/23/2009)

Lea Radick, E&E reporter

A new version of the Washington blame game has surfaced in the form of a Web site that brings attention to energy projects throughout the United States -- many of them renewable -- that have been delayed or terminated because of opposition from environmental groups.

The Web site, called "Project No Project," which was developed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, lists more than 100 energy projects -- running the gamut from wind to nuclear power -- in 31 states. It describes how local environmental activists as well as some members of Congress have stalled these projects.

It also offers a prognosis for each project, forecasting whether its prospect of advancing is "indeterminate," "likely" or, in some cases, "dead."

William Kovacs, the chamber's vice president of environment, technology and regulatory affairs, said in an interview that the organization's goal in creating this Web site is to ensure that "Congress is informed to bring forward smart grid and that they understand that these groups are out there."

Kovacs calls them "not-in-my-backyard," or NIMBY, groups and asserts that they are responsible for many of the challenges and delays encountered by project developers across the country because of what the Web site details as their attempts to change zoning laws and to sue.

Stormy words over Cape Cod wind farm

One of the projects highlighted in a U.S. Chamber press release issued Friday about the Web site is the Cape Wind offshore wind farm in Nantucket Sound, located 3 miles off the Massachusetts coast in federal waters.

The project, although just granted a "super permit" by the Massachusetts state board last week that could allow it to move forward, has faced opposition since it first proposed to build the wind farm.

The Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, identified by "Project No Project" as one of the main sources of opposition to the wind farm, is a nonprofit group that has been fighting its development since 2001 because of potential adverse economic, environmental and public safety issues.

"Today renewable energy is a good thing, but a lot of times developers don't pick good sites, and conflict is created, and it's unfortunate," said Glenn Wattlely, CEO and president of the alliance.

"But it's also very immature or trite to say it's a NIMBY phenomenon," he said, adding that in the case of Cape Wind, there are "at least a dozen very serious issues," including wind turbine interference with aviation and shipping radar.

Wanted: sites that are not 'conflicted'

"I think it's useful and constructive to point out that there are instances in which well-financed NIMBY groups can excessively delay important clean energy projects that serve the national interest, and I think that has been true in the case of Cape Wind," said Cape Wind Communications Director Mark Rodgers in an interview.

Wattlely agrees that the Web site is a good idea, but for different reasons.

"I think this is a good idea to draw attention to all the many projects across the country having siting problems, and a way to get around that is have developers find sites that are not conflicted," Wattlely said. He added that he thinks the wind farm should be placed 20 to 30 miles away from the coast, where there would be fewer potential conflicts.

The "Project No Project" Web site also identifies Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), whose Cape Cod retreat overlooks Cape Wind, as another main source of opposition.

So far, the Web site has been a success, according to Kovacs.

"It's making its point," he said, adding that the chamber has received information about other delayed projects since the site went up.

The chamber plans to add information about stalled coal projects to the site, as well.

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