

# Massive study examines offshore wind's impact on fishing, fisheries

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A just released “first of its kind” report that federal regulators and the fishing industry spent three years working on is making the rounds, exploring the impacts of offshore wind on fisheries and commercial fishermen, and identifying the questions that remain unanswered.

They just released their results in a nearly 400-page “[Synthesis of Science](#)” report — a collaborative effort between the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the lead regulator of offshore wind; NOAA’s Northeast Fisheries Science Center; and the Responsible Offshore Development Alliance (RODA), a membership-based coalition of the fishing industry.

“I would say this [report] is the first of its kind,” said Fiona Hogan, one of the principal investigators and the research director for RODA. “It was kind of amazing ... that we were able to get state and federal employees, academics, even from over in Europe ... and the fishing industry directly working together to write this document.”

The report reviews potential impacts on the ecosystem, fishing operations, fisheries socioeconomics, and long-standing federal fisheries surveys, as well as the importance of conducting sufficient and proper cumulative impact analyses.

“[Electric and magnetic fields] for example — people say we

know everything there is to know about EMF; others are saying we know nothing," Hogan said. "Given the pace of developments, we still have a large number of questions ... there may be research coming from Europe on some things ... but they may not necessarily be directly applicable to the U.S."

The sections, undertaken by different groups of researchers, were reviewed by members of the fishing industry, ensuring their perspective and insights were included.

"I really think the report reflects nicely on the fact that all of this is moving a lot quicker than the science should typically allow for the industrialization of our oceans," said Tom Dameron, the government relations and fisheries science liaison for Surfside Foods, a shellfish company based in New Jersey, and an industry reviewer on a few report sections.

In response to a request for comment on the report, the American Clean Power Association (ACP), an offshore wind and renewable energy industry group, said developers work closely with regulators and the fishing industry to address their concerns and avoid or mitigate impacts to fisheries.

"America's abundant coastline offers the opportunity for both offshore wind and fisheries to coexist while mitigating

the impacts of climate change that fishermen are witnessing firsthand," said ACP in an email statement. "The recent March 2023 IPCC Report for policymakers reiterates that wind energy is a vital part of a net zero energy system."

In response to a request for comment from BOEM and Brian Hooker, the agency's co-lead on the report, an agency spokesperson provided a general written statement.

"The information provided in the Synthesis of Science report enhances understanding of existing science and data gaps related to offshore wind energy development interactions with fish and fisheries on regional and broader levels," read the statement. "This report is unique in that each topic includes a fishing industry perspective on potential impacts on fishing operations."

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The report is part of a 10-year [memorandum of understanding](#) between the three groups -- signed in 2019 — that establishes a mutual interest of the involved parties to responsibly develop offshore wind while considering impacts to fisheries, the fishing industry and marine habitats.

A potential impact is on long-standing [federal fisheries](#)

[surveys](#), as survey vessels may be physically precluded from obtaining data around and within the wind arrays.

“By disrupting NOAA Fisheries survey programs and the advice that depends upon them, regional wind development will result in major adverse impacts on U.S. fisheries stakeholders, including fishermen and fishing communities,” the report states. “The impacts on survey programs will lead to greater uncertainty in estimates of abundance, which through the application of the precautionary approach will likely lead to lower fishery quotas, ultimately resulting in lost revenue to commercial and recreational fishermen.”

Andy Lipsky, the offshore wind science lead for the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, said in a release that the report helped the agencies as they developed their [joint survey mitigation strategy](#) to address this issue.

“It also helps us define and begin developing the new kinds of monitoring required to continue our long-term data streams on ocean life as well as needed research on how offshore wind energy changes marine habitats and fisheries,” he said.

Up next will be a companion review of floating wind. Floating turbines, which sit differently than the fixed turbines being installed along most of the East Coast, are so

far planned for the Gulf of Maine and California leases. The first synthesis report was funded by a \$150,000 grant from NOAA Fisheries, and the second will be funded by about the same amount.

Hogan said that ideally, she would like to see the report used as a resource for all, including wind developers.

During a state fisheries and wind meeting last week, the new report was referenced by the counsel for the New Bedford Port Authority, Blair Bailey, during a conversation on compensation fund estimates for an Ørsted project, Revolution Wind.

He cited from a section about knowledge gaps, which reads: "The research recommendations outlined in the previous chapters indicate an enormous amount of research is still needed in order to understand the impact of offshore wind on the environment and fisheries, but time is limited."

"So what we would simply point out to Ørsted and every other developer is these are people's livelihoods, and you have to know what you don't know when you're setting up these mitigation funds," Bailey said. "The number one thing you need to take into account is you're making assumptions in these reports ... assuming issues that you really don't know. You don't know what the artificial reef impact is, you don't know what the impact on dispersion is..."

An economic impacts analysis by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution for the Revolution Wind project, which will inform the compensation amount set for Massachusetts fishermen, assumes about 95% of the lease area will ultimately be fishable (in the United States, there is no barring of fishermen from leases, which is sometimes the case overseas).

Some fishermen, however, have expressed they will likely not enter wind farm areas due to possible insurance hikes and safety concerns, as the turbines may affect [vessel radar](#) or present a high snagging risk for gear. At the very least, they have also communicated they would not fish as closely to the turbines as the WHOI report assumes in its calculations.

Last month at a forum in Maine, fishermen communicated that over the years, they've been left with more questions than answers on offshore wind.

Panelists discuss offshore wind during the Maine Fishermen's Forum on March 3, 2023.

Credit: Anastasia E. Lennon / The New Bedford Light

NOAA's Lipsky, sitting on a panel with Hogan, addressed information gaps when an attendee asked what impacts decades of development in Europe have had on fisheries, and if studies on those developments can inform what impacts fishermen can anticipate here.

"The key lesson learned from Europe is to do an excellent job establishing our scientific monitoring systems ... we know a lot more about what happens at the turbine level ... but not a lot about what happens at the wind development area level or the regional level," he said. "There's still a lot of



uncertainty and understanding what is happening at a population scale, which, for many of the folks in this room, that's the scale that we all really care about, is what are the interactions on the animals that we are managing or fishing for."

Lipsky noted that "the sky has not fallen" on some fishing overseas, but that researchers and federal agencies need to collect the necessary data in a standard, coherent way as offshore wind builds out in the United States.

The questioner in the audience pressed him further: "Is the reason why there's so much uncertainty still because they just didn't do that work [in Europe]? Yes or no?"

"Yes," Lipsky replied.

Hogan said the report can serve as a guide for regulators and all other stakeholders for future studies, with its final section recommending research questions that still need answers.

"We developed our own list of research priorities and we'd like that to serve as a to-do list to help focus research," she said. "Learning as much as possible about every topic is critical for every sector, be it regulators, developers or the fishing industry."

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