



Cape Fear Firebird

The Light of Save the Cape

March 11, 2013

The answer is blowin' in the wind
–Bob Dylan

Tilting at Windmills

On January 9, the US Department of Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, an eager new bureaucracy, held a public information meeting in Wilmington to introduce the first step in planning for wind energy production off the coast of North Carolina. The presentations and other information are available at the BOEM Web site: <http://www.boem.gov/>. Go to Renewable Energy Programs, then State Activities, then North Carolina.

The environmental gang was well represented, and cheered for the concept enthusiastically. The concept is indeed wonderful. Wind is abundant and consistent off the coast of North Carolina, and producing electricity with windmills has very little cost in atmospheric carbon production.

But the Devil is in the details. The Audubon Society points out that wind turbines kill a lot of birds, and the Society takes the position (which we adopt) in support of wind power but recognizing that such facilities must be planned, sited and operated in concert with other actions needed to minimize and mitigate their impacts on birds and other wildlife populations.

The Cape Fear presents a lesson in that and other conflicts. North Carolina's best locations for offshore wind power have been eliminated from consideration by conflicts with military traffic, so BOEM is left with two less optimal sites: Kitty Hawk near the Virginia border, and the Cape Fear.

Thus when the concept is reduced to specifics, these problems emerge:

- The Cape Fear has the greatest problems of potential conflicts with ship traffic, marine habitat, commercial and sport fishing, and birds.
- The visual impact is always a significant issue, enough for the National Park Service to require that wind farms be not less than 20 miles from National Seashore beaches. That rule does not apply to the Cape Fear, so the windmills would be closer, as close as six miles.

But the biggest problem, not addressed at all by BOEM, is the cost. While the operating cost of offshore wind farms is not high, the capital cost is huge—much more than conventional production using fossil fuels. As a result, substantial subsidies in the form of tax credits would be necessary for economic feasibility, even taking into account economies of scale and technological evolution.

