

DOWN TO EARTH

Tidal power developer finds 'local hostiles' in the water

JOHN RICHARDSON

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"Local hostility" seems a little strong to Ed Friedman.

"We certainly wouldn't call ourselves hostiles. We've always (expressed) a very measured opposition," he said.

Friedman is the leader of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, a midcoast environmental group and the only organization to stand up formally against a proposal to convert Maine's tidal currents into electricity.

Last week, the target of its measured opposition became the latest would-be tidal power developer to abandon plans for submerged turbines along the coast of Maine.

Maine Tidal Energy Co. officially pulled out because "insufficient development potential exists," according to a letter to federal regulators, although an attorney for the company also cited "local hostility" in an e-mail to the Brunswick Times Record. The attorney did not respond to phone calls or an e-mail Friday.

The opposition in Bath was the first skirmish in what could become a new environmental dilemma along Maine's coast. Tidal power offers huge potential as an alternative energy source, but at what cost to fish and other ocean life?

"Everyone on our board is in favor of cleaner energy and weaning ourselves off the oil bottle. But it doesn't mean you destroy the migrating fish runs by plugging up where they go through," Friedman said.

"We really do need to address the fact that not every site in the state is fair game for (underwater turbines). We kind of go gaga over the idea of alternative energy, but it's not without costs."

Merrymeeting Bay is a biologically rich estuary at the mouths of the Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers. Friedman's group formally challenged a federal permit that gave Maine Tidal Energy exclusive rights to study the potential of "the chops," a deep and narrow inlet that links the bay to the ocean.

Had the turbines been proposed for somewhere else in the waterway, Friedman said, the group wouldn't have been so, well, hostile to the idea.

The environmental dilemma is far from the biggest challenge facing tidal energy in Maine. Technical and financial challenges have done much more to weed out developers such as Maine Tidal Energy, said Dana Murch, hydropower expert for the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

Developers applied for a total of 18 experimental permits along the Maine coast during an alternative-energy gold rush during the past two years. But eight applications have since been withdrawn or surrendered, and only a few developers appear to be moving forward with testing and research, Murch said.

"This technology doesn't exist. People are literally doing the research and development to develop submersible units to generate power at a reasonable cost," Murch said. "There's no commercial-size operation anywhere in the world (like those planned in Maine). ... There's huge potential out there – how much of it is practical, we don't know."

So, although state agencies also are concerned about potential environmental effects, it's too soon to judge, he said.

"What we really need to do is to get some pilot projects (in the water), not only for the developers to begin to evaluate how they work, but for the agencies to begin to evaluate what the environmental impact is," Murch said. "You can't do that in a lab."

That first pilot project could move forward this summer off Eastport. Portland-based Ocean Renewable Power Co., along with the University of Maine and Maine Maritime Academy, is developing turbines that resemble the horizontal blades on an old-fashioned reel lawn mower, except that they're 14 feet tall.

The project could answer a lot of questions about the potential for affordable energy, as well as the potential for more environmental conflicts like the one in Bath.

It also could mean that tidal power developers will return to Merrymeeting Bay.

"I'm hoping that the fact that there are 'local hostiles' in the area" will scare them away from the chops, Friedman said. "We're ready."

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