

How Prepared Are US Permitting Agencies for Offshore Wind? A Cautionary Tale From the UK

Overview

A healthy pipeline of offshore projects gives confidence to investors and contributes greatly to cost reduction and supply chain growth. Yet, building this demand must go hand-in-hand with fundamental enabling actions in the regulatory system. The United Kingdom (UK) Government is responsible for ensuring procedures for permitting renewable energy infrastructure are clear, transparent, coordinated, and proportionate. Improving the efficiency and speed of the permitting process is crucial for sustainable growth. Yet, offshore wind in the UK goes through one of the most complex and rigorous permitting regimes in the world.

In response to the 2008 global financial crisis, new permitting legislation was introduced to improve efficiency by centralizing permitting within a new agency. This coincided with government austerity measures that hit public spending at a time when offshore wind was significantly ramping-up its development program. It was argued that such changes affected the efficiency of the UK permitting agencies, and questions arose over whether they were now sufficiently equipped to deliver their permitting responsibilities under the predicted offshore wind ramp-up.

This poster presents the key findings of a detailed study commissioned by RenewableUK of all the UK permitting agencies and their supporting government departments in England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland with responsibility for regulating offshore wind. The study was considered a "health-check" on the preparedness of these key stakeholders. We asked: "What are the key challenges faced when permitting offshore wind, and what can be done to overcome them?"

The word cloud shown here is based on the seven major "operational-based" issues identified in the study and which are considered relevant to the question of whether US federal and state permitting authorities and stakeholders are prepared to deliver offshore wind. Explaining these challenges, along with the ways in which they were overcome, will help US agencies avoid repeating the mistakes made by their UK counterparts.

Learning outcomes

- Seven themes were common across all permitting agencies despite variability in jurisdiction, level of responsibility within central government or regional (the US equivalent is federal or state).
- Pragmatic and prudent attempts to address these themes could make a difference to the readiness of US permitting agencies and promote a shared commitment to delivering offshore wind.
- Commitment from private and public sectors to get behind the overall objectives of our seven recommendations not only improves permitting efficiency, but agency morale and so optimism for future investment.

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Funding shortfalls

Spending cuts result in reduction in staff numbers, recruitment caps and controls on the use of consultants, thus downsizing resources previously assigned to offshore wind. Impacts include:

- Loss of highly knowledgeable points of contact for the industry, which are not being back-filled.
- Loss of research and opportunities to build relationships across regulatory organisations

Gaps in regulatory specialists skill-sets

A shortfall in specialist skills need to deal with any future ramp-up in offshore wind. Regulators with little or no contingency measures in place, such as redeployment of expertise or funding to outsource additional support are most at risk.

Insufficient levels of standardization of permitting requirements across geographic areas and agencies

Standardization of the permitting process greatly de-risks time limiting phases of offshore development. Adopting an 'evidence based' approach may hold the key to better continuity and alignment of resources, avoiding bottlenecks by providing timely advice, identifying challenges and unresolved issues.

Lack of inter-agency coordination

Improving inter-organization coordination across all permitting bodies requires a commitment over and above the status quo. Need for a greater focus on operational aspects of regulators to ensure cross jurisdiction coordination that improves consistency, avoids conflict, wasteful overlaps, sharing of best practice and promotes networking opportunities.

Knowledge gaps and data-hoarding

Sharing knowledge enables a more pragmatic approach to industry needs and increases scientific certainty over the impacts of offshore wind farms on sensitive environmental receptors. Increasing knowledge should ensure decision-making is less dependent on the precautionary principle.

Inability to appreciate other stakeholder perspectives

Collaborative and pragmatic engagement between regulators and developers can overcome barriers to offshore wind. It increases awareness amongst regulators of the challenges developers face and amongst developers of constraints regulators face.

Integration issues resulting from agency mergers and new regulatory organizations

When organizational change occurs through a merger or relocation there is an increased risk of disruption to the continuity and delivery of services. Centralization of services and adaptation to the offshore wind sector is critical.

