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Acceptance of offshore wind power lies in “fair practices”

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Nearly a year ago, this author raised the following concern in the Future Energy Landscape series.

“The current challenges faced by onshore wind power, such as opposition movements in local municipalities, suggest the possibility of offshore wind power also encountering major challenges in the future process of full-fledged development.¹ Research analyzing the objections that have been raised repeatedly in recent years in areas where onshore wind power is to be located also noted ‘social factors,’ such as distrust of the operator and transparency and fairness of the planning and decision-making process, in determining whether there is support for wind power.”

I also suggested that the reason the travails of onshore wind energy have not yet affected offshore wind projects is simply due to the fact that few offshore projects have reached the commercial development stage.

Roughly a year on, the offshore wind sector is showing signs of further expansion, with anticipated construction and launch of a string of large-scale projects following on from the wind farm that commenced operations in January 2023 in Akita and Noshiro ports²: in March 2024³ an area of sea off Happo and Noshiro, Akita Prefecture was selected as a Promotion Zone for the Development of Marine Renewable Energy Power Generation (hereafter, “promotion zone”) under the Act on Promoting the Utilization of Sea Areas for the Development of Marine Renewable Energy Power Generation Facilities (“Act on Sea Area Utilization for Renewable Energy”), followed by the designation of the southern Japan Sea coast of Aomori Prefecture and seas off Yuza, Yamagata Prefecture in December 2024⁴.

Does this mean that residents living near these offshore wind farm locations and other stakeholders have reasonably and peacefully accepted these developments/will continue to accept them reasonably in future?

In addition to those discussed in my previous paper, many studies have analysed the factors and

¹ Institute of Energy Economics, Japan. “Today’s Challenges for Onshore Wind Power Foreshadow Tomorrow’s Challenges for Offshore Wind Power (Possibly)”. Tomoko Murakami, 2024-2-7 (<https://eneken.ieej.or.jp/data/11612.pdf>).

² Akita Offshore Wind Corporation, Business Overview (<https://aow.co.jp/jp/project/>).

³ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Results of the selection of offshore wind farm operator in the seas off Happo and Noshiro, Akita Prefecture. 2024-3-22 (<https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2023/03/20240322002/20240322002.html>).

⁴ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Results of the selection of offshore wind farm operator in the seas off of the southern Japan Sea coast of Aomori Prefecture and seas off Yuza, Yamagata Prefecture. 2024-12-24 (<https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2024/12/20241224002/20241224002.html>).

challenges of the social acceptance of wind power and noted policy implications.

Chief among them would be Task 28 of the IEA Wind Technology Collaboration Programmes (IEA Wind TCP), the Social Acceptance of Wind Energy⁵, with the report of Phase III (2016 to 2020) translated to Japanese in its entirety by NEDO⁶.

The array of lessons learned from addressing various opposition movements in Western countries is too vast to cover here, but if I were to choose one keyword for social acceptance, it would be “fairness.” In slightly more detail, this is asking, “have all specific issues been investigated and dealt with, and do we have the approval of those likely to be affected?” For example, one case cited in “A Serious Commitment to Fair Wind Energy Projects”⁷ is that of a site where noise is below the permitted legal level. Here, it would be incumbent on the operator “as an industry member of good faith” to monitor the effect of noise on residents and address it as appropriate. It is clear that residents’ views cannot be ignored just because regulatory standards are satisfied.

To those involved in wind farms and other environmentally impactful projects (not just offshore wind), this may seem obvious. In fact, as can be seen from the discussions at councils held in various regions based on the Act on Sea Area Utilization for Renewable Energy, many operators do not believe that anything is permissible just because they have cleared the regulatory standards, and it seems that they are genuinely engaged in dialogue with stakeholders about noise and the impact on fisheries, for instance.

Meanwhile, the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy’s “Know Offshore Wind Power” website presents the special features of offshore wind energy and its challenges in accessible terms suitable for beginners. In response to an FAQ, “Do wind turbines in the sea disrupt the fishing industry?”, the Agency replies as follows:

*Under the Act on Sea Area Utilization for Renewable Energy 2018, marine promotion zones are designated upon careful discussion with stakeholders including fishing interests where “it is expected that the operation of the marine renewable energy power generation business will not hinder fisheries” in order to promote the development of offshore wind energy.*⁸

This can also be read as the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy thinking that the promotion zones are decided in consultation with none other than fisheries representatives, including oceanologists, meteorologists and other experts, therefore would not negatively impact the fishing industry. It is a commonly held belief in our approach to the application of science and technology today that if we have conservative standards based on current scientific understanding, then that is enough (not just for wind power). However, this is hardly a response to the concerns of fisherfolk who fear possible impacts and cannot be persuaded by “standards based on scientific understanding”.

⁵ IEA, IEA Wind TCP Task 28, Social Acceptance of Wind Energy Projects (<https://iea-wind.org/task28/>)

⁶ NEDO, IEA Wind TCP Task 28, Social Acceptance of Wind Energy Projects Phase III – collected output documents (14) and Japanese version of the Offshore Wind Power Energy Projects Practical Guide, 2023-4-21 (https://www.nedo.go.jp/library/ZZFF_100048.html).

⁷ NEDO, A Serious Commitment to Fair Wind Energy Projects, Recommendations to IEA Task 28, John Aston, (<https://www.nedo.go.jp/content/100959901.pdf>).

⁸ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Know the Renewable Energy of the Future/Offshore Wind Power(https://www.enecho.meti.go.jp/category/saving_and_new/saiene/yojo_furyoku/dl/yojo_shirou.pdf).

If we are to follow the recommendations of the IEA Wind TCP Task 28 above, a judgment that fisheries will not be impacted is not the end of the story. Is it not the role of the national government to stand at the forefront and show itself “as an industry member in good faith” that listens continuously to the fears and concerns of fishers and works with them to alleviate their concerns?

For example, the nuclear power industry has a phrase that exists in the DNA of those who work in the sector: *Jishuteki anzensei koje* (voluntary safety improvement). This is based on a consistent attitude of rigorous reflection on one’s own conduct so as to avoid the conceit that safety is assured by meeting regulatory standards. I would like to see this stance incorporated into the policy documents of other industries too.

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