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Europe's offshore wind future needs new transnational power grid

STOCKHOLM — Building a new energy system for Europe by 2030 may seem like a daunting task since it will require thoughtful planning, exhaustive research, proper engineering, billions of Euros and faith that the end product will be efficient, affordable and long lasting.

But the quicker that a pan-European electricity super highway starts taking advantage of the vast potential of wind energy located in the North, Irish and Baltic Seas, the better.

That's the assessment of the European Wind Energy Association (EWEA) and several people interviewed here today in the exhibition hall at the Offshore Wind 2009 conference.

"We need a dedicated grid, we need several strands," said Arno Verbeek, who is general manager of Airtricity's offshore division. "I see that, a transnational grid, as the only way forward. By having a true European grid would be the only way to get all that offshore power to the European demand centres."

Verbeek believes it inevitable that at least the first building blocks of a new offshore grid system will be operating in northern European waters in the next 20 years.

He also said a dedicated offshore grid will produce huge amounts of green electricity while reducing the amount of CO₂ associated with burning fossil fuels. In addition, an offshore grid will create a large number of new jobs and promote much valuable research and development.

He added, however, that building a supergrid will require political support and the creation of a single electricity market for all of Europe.

The need for a dedicated transnational offshore grid system will most likely increase in the next 20 years as more wind parks are built off Europe's coast, said Bjorn Soderholm, a project and construction manager with Grontmij.

"I would say it [a new offshore transnational grid] is important," Soderholm said "If we continue to build offshore parks, the need for that kind of system increases."

EWEA's plan shows a transnational offshore power grid can be created if 14 more offshore grids are built in the next two decades in addition to the 11 existing grids and the 21 currently being studied in the North and Baltic Seas.

Assembling such a super highway for electricity generated from wind power, EWEA notes, will help to usher in a profitable, affordable, dependable and healthier new era for Europe. In addition, harnessing the region's most plentiful energy source will dramatically decrease the need for imported fossil fuels which cause global warming and political unrest.

"It is recommended that a transnational offshore grid infrastructure be built to connect the predicted 40 GW by 2020, 85 GW by 2025 and 150 GW of offshore wind power by 2030, together with the promotion of trade between electricity markets," noted the plan, outlined in EWEA's recent publication *Oceans of Opportunity*.

"A realistic planning schedule for the offshore grid should closely follow existing initiatives for offshore interconnectors, and would conceive a grid in a modular and methodical way. The transnational offshore grid must be planned as an integral part of the European transmission system and involve onshore reinforcements where necessary."

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