

FERC pulls plug on Northern Calif. wave power project

Colin Sullivan, *Environment & Energy Publishing*, 8-9-11

Wave power's prospects in California suffered another setback last week when federal regulators quietly yanked a permit for a pilot project that was to operate off the coast of Sonoma County in the northern part of the state.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission told the Sonoma County Water Agency that it will cancel a permit issued in 2009 for a "hydrokinetic" project off the coast because of a lack of funds.

The cancellation, effective Sept. 5, was brought about because the water agency failed to comply with terms set out in the 2009 FERC order that requested periodic progress reports on initial plans for the project. A cancellation memo from FERC sent to the agency noted "that all activities associated with the development of the draft license application had been suspended until project funding was secured."

Cordel Stillman, deputy chief engineer at the water agency, said the daunting nature of the permit process and failure to secure the \$2 million to \$3 million needed to study two potential sites led to the cancellation. He expressed relief that the project had been canned.

"To be completely up front, it was a long shot to begin with," Stillman said in an interview. "The technology is just not there yet."

Stillman added that even a small project such as one envisioned by the agency has to secure at least 20 permits from various agencies to proceed. That kind of work would have easily exhausted the initial \$3 million investment, he said.

"Just trying to do the environmental studies necessary to put something like that in the ocean, it's huge," he said. "It's a big thing for a local agency to take on."

The decision is the latest setback for wave power, which is still a largely unproven renewable energy technology. Pacific Gas & Electric Co. recently suspended two such projects, in Humboldt Bay and Mendocino County, and the future of a 30-megawatt pilot proposed by former San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom (D) that would cost about \$140 million is uncertain.

Newsom, an avid wave power advocate, has since moved on to become lieutenant governor. He told the San Francisco Chronicle in December that he still believes in wave energy and intends to keep pushing. His office did not return calls seeking further comment.

The problems associated with wave power, according to a study completed for the California Renewable Energy Transmission Initiative, are many. A report conducted in 2008 by the consulting firm Black and Veatch, which has been studying wave and tidal energy since 1975, pointed to transmission constraints, the high cost of infrastructure and marine habitat disruption. It also said electricity derived from wave energy can cost as much as \$445 per megawatt-hour.