

Proposed San Onofre wave farm halted by feds

Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times, 3-21-12

An Orange County entrepreneur's controversial proposal to build one of the nation's first hydrokinetic wave farms off San Onofre State Beach isn't quite dead, but it's definitely treading water.

Federal regulators this month terminated the licensing process for the project after Chong Kim, general manager of Fountain Valley-based JD Products, told them that without federal grant money or a business partner, he could not prepare baseline information and conduct the studies necessary to apply to build and operate the generators.

"Based on the information you provided ... it is clear that you are not able to proceed with the licensing process at this time," the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission wrote in a March 9 letter to Kim, a retired engineer.

The decision deals a blow to Kim's ambitious goal of harvesting 3,186 megawatts of electricity by installing thousands of ocean wave power generators a mile offshore.

The idea has not sat well with environmental groups, anglers and surfers who treasure San Onofre, a stretch of coast known for its surf breaks and domed nuclear reactors perched on the shore.

Those critics say Kim's proposal is unrealistic and could harm marine life, alter waves, block off popular fishing spots and even interfere with training exercises at the nearby Camp Pendleton.

Even environmental groups that generally support renewable energy and have backed wave energy projects elsewhere have come out against Kim's proposal, which he has outlined in a series of public meetings and regulatory filings over the last year.

Surfrider Foundation, based in San Clemente, heralded the federal government's decision "because this project failed to meet the most basic requirements to prepare baseline information to assess risks and impacts to the coastal environment," said environmental director Chad Nelsen.

Utilities, energy companies and small start-ups have long dreamed of harnessing ocean waves to produce clean energy, but have struggled to develop and test the technology on the West Coast.

Though several wave energy projects have been proposed off the California coast, most have faltered, and the waves south of Point Conception aren't considered consistently powerful enough to make electricity generation worthwhile.

Under a 2010 preliminary permit, Kim has permission to continue studying construction of a wave farm off San Onofre until September 2013. He did not immediately return calls and an email.

The agency's letter says Kim may come back "when you have obtained the resources necessary to fully develop a license application."

In an email, Kim said the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission halted the project because he proposed conducting the studies using income from operating the wave power generators instead of completing them before construction as the agency requires.

"It would take a lot of money to complete the study, and we are not able to pay," he wrote.

Unless the agency has someone else with a similar plan, Kim wrote, "we will not give up because we need this type of project for our future in Southern California."