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Stockton poll: Wind farm support falls in New Jersey

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — Support for wind turbines off the coast has plummeted over the past four years, especially in shore towns, according to a Stockton University Poll.

According to a news release on the findings, more state residents support the wind farms than oppose them, with 50 percent in favor of plans to build wind turbines at sea to generate electricity and 33 percent opposed. Sixteen percent were unsure.

The results reflect a drop of 30 percentage points from the findings of a September 2019 Stockton Poll that asked an identical question. In 2019, 80 percent of adult New Jersey residents supported offshore wind farms.

Four years ago, 77 percent of residents living in areas that border the ocean or a bay supported offshore wind turbines. Only 33 percent of coastal area respondents favor such construction in the poll released last week by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. The poll has a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points.

The main reasons for opposition to offshore turbines: potential harm to sea life and obstructed ocean views.

In July, the U.S. Interior Department approved the construction and operation of 98 wind turbines and as many as three offshore substations in the Ocean Wind 1 project.

“When the concept of wind farms moved from abstract policy considerations to preparing for actual construction, many residents said ‘Not in my backyard, or at least not off my beach,’” said John Froonjian, director of the Hughes Center. “That’s especially true along the coast, where wind farms have been the focus of protests and legislative election campaigns.”

In the new poll of nearly 600 New Jersey adults, 72 percent still expressed concern about climate change, with 51 percent saying it is very important for the state to combat it and 21 percent saying it is somewhat important. Only 1 in 4 said it was not very important (9 percent) or not important at all (17 percent) for the state to make those efforts.

A majority of 52 percent said renewable energy sources such as wind will improve the climate, with 9 percent saying it would worsen conditions and 28 percent saying it would have no effect.

Pluralities — not a majority but the biggest group of respondents — also saw benefits in other areas of concern. They included improvements to

job opportunities (45 percent), lower home energy costs (39 percent) and improved reliability of electricity (35 percent).

However, 48 percent opposed giving tax breaks to wind farm firms, with 39 percent in support and 12 percent unsure.

Asked to rate the impact of wind farms, 71 percent said turbines would affect ocean views a great deal (34 percent) or a little (37 percent), with 16 percent saying they would have no effect.

Also, 68 percent said wind turbines would affect marine life a great deal (44 percent) or a little (24 percent). Respondents also thought tourism would be affected at least somewhat: a great deal by 27 percent and a little by 28 percent, while 37 percent saw no impact on tourism.

“On every question, residents of shore communities were more negative about wind energy than people living elsewhere in New Jersey,” said Alyssa Maurice, Hughes Center research associate.

Coastal municipalities were defined as municipalities where any part touches the ocean or bay. Residents self-reported whether they live in a coastal municipality.

Maurice said an even stronger divide was found along partisan lines, with Democrats strongly supporting wind energy and seeing potential benefits and Republicans roundly opposing turbines as negative forces.

Poll respondents were evenly split when asked whether authority to approve wind farms should rest with state government or municipalities where offshore construction would take place, with 41 percent saying the state, 42 percent saying the municipalities and 15 percent unsure.

David Shanker, New Jersey spokesman for Save Right Whales Coalition, said the data are positive.

“It’s refreshing to see that Stockton’s poll indicates that more New Jerseyans are taking the time to really understand the issues and we hope those we elected are watching that as well,” he said.

Shanker, who attributes the high level of whale deaths to offshore work related to wind farms, said the rush to approve plans for offshore wind energy was intended to “pull the blinds over the eyes of statewide voters and to avoid investigating the very real impacts these turbines will have on our state.”

He said since December 2022, whales have washed ashore in New Jersey at a rate of nearly 1 per week and 72 across the Eastern Seaboard.

“We’re slowly waking up to the fact that this isn’t a ‘shore issue’; it’s a threat to our state, to our marine ecosystems, to our economy, to our safety and even to our electricity rates,” Shanker said. “Offshore wind energy based on the state’s current plans is irresponsible and we’re calling on our lawmakers to put the brakes on this process, to investigate the impact and then, only then, to strategize on implementing clean energy solutions.”

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