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County citizens speak out on offshore energy

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MOREHEAD CITY —

People's opinion on offshore energy is as varied as the different kinds of energy sources being explored.

Gov. Beverly Perdue's Scientific Advisory Panel on Offshore Energy met Thursday at the UNC Institute of Marine Sciences to accept public

comments on offshore energy. The panel is conducting public hearings as a part of its goal to evaluate offshore energy options and provide the governor with a recommendation on an offshore energy strategy.

A dozen people spoke at the public hearing Thursday. The focus of the hearing was on exploring offshore wind energy, but their comments also touched on other energy sources, including conventional fossil fuels, geothermal energy and solar power.

Wind energy is currently the main alternate energy being investigated on the North Carolina coast. Recent scientific studies have shown significant



An interested and concerned panel takes note during the public comment portion of the meeting concerning alternative energy at the Institute for Marine Science in Morehead City. (Dylan Ray photo)

potential wind energy resources off the coast, including in Carteret County. However, concerns have been raised at public meetings on the subject, ranging from how the wind farms will affect the view of the coast (and subsequently tourism) to environmental impacts and cost effectiveness.

At Thursday's hearing, John Droz, a Morehead City resident and physicist who specializes in energy, said current energy policies in the United States are being written not by scientists, but lobbyists. He said the panel needs a clear, unbiased and empirical evaluation of wind energy.

"Due to lobbyists pushing for multi-conglomerate clients, this hasn't been done," he said. "We don't need reports by scientists, but scientific reports. Until we get this, we shouldn't spend taxpayer money."

Mr. Droz said there's no evidence wind energy will reduce CO2 emissions, one of the selling points wind energy supporters have brought up. He said there are other alternate energy sources, such as geothermal energy, that will generate more jobs and electricity than offshore wind.

Kenneth Lang echoed Mr. Droz's message. He said that many of the people who have attended and spoken at previous panel hearings are "pseudo-scientists" representing lobbyists.

"Science considers the pros and cons, not political leanings," he said. "Every energy source has benefits and problems. Much is made of green energy sources, but not the problems."

Mr. Lang said wind power is intermittent and must be backed up by conventional fossil fuel plants. He said these backup plants are less efficient than normal ones because they too are run intermittently with the wind farms.

Others at the meeting were in support of wind energy. Dick Barber said wind energy is a renewable energy source that can't be used up, as well as increasing as a result of climate change.

"Cost is a clear-cut issue," he said, "when you consider respiratory diseases caused by burning coal. The military cost for foreign oil is staggering, not just in money but in human lives."

Penny Hooper, representative of N.C. Interfaith Power & Light, a nonprofit, multi-denominational, religious environmental group, said her group is also in support of wind energy.

"If we continue to fuel offshore drilling, it will fuel an outdated mode of

energy," she said. "The alternative is to promote offshore wind energy. It will be the backbone to a non-polluting energy source and transportation."

Her husband, Mark, is president of Carteret County Crossroads, a local environmental nonprofit group. Mr. Hooper said his group also supports wind energy, as well as more efficient use of existing energy sources through more efficient building designs.

One speaker was in favor of North Carolina preparing for offshore drilling. John Poag, owner of Capt. Bill's Waterfront Restaurant, said the amount of bad information out on offshore drilling is appalling.

"Back in the 1970s, scientists were saying we're going to have a new ice age," he said. "Now these same scientists are saying the polar ice caps are melting and we'll have three feet of sea level rise."

While Mr. Poag didn't directly encourage offshore drilling, he said the state should be prepared for it. He said the state government should develop regulations on offshore drilling and make sure it will receive half the royalties from drilling.

"They'll be drilling here next," he said. "You can't stick your head in the sand."

The governor's science panel will hold another public hearing in Manteo at 4 p.m., March 24. The hearing will be in the Dare County Administration Building at 954 Marshall C. Collins Drive.

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