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Province to partner with N.S. to study tidal power

Energy Report will examine environmental impact of marine renewable power generation

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Buoyed by the potential tidal energy bonanza in the Bay of Fundy, the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia governments are jointly funding a study that will bring marine renewable power generation one step closer to reality.

The two provincial governments will each invest \$75,000 in a strategic environmental assessment of tidal power in the Bay of Fundy. The assessment will include a comprehensive consultation process with organizations and groups with an interest in the future of tidal power in the region as well as a socio-economic impact assessment report.

The Offshore Energy and Environmental Research Association, a group of Nova Scotia universities established and funded by the provincial government to study the sector, will be responsible for carrying out the request for proposal process.

Meinhard Doelle, chairman of the assessment's technical advisory group, said the two jurisdictions will be making waves in the Canadian tidal power community with this innovative study.

"The idea of doing a strategic environmental assessment has been talked about for a long time but we don't have a lot of experience doing this in Canada, so this is a novel thing," Doelle said.

"It's a very exciting process. It has the potential to address a lot of the shortcomings that you see at the project specific level."

When the final report is back in the governments' hands next year, the energy ministers will have a better idea of the background of the competing tidal technologies on the market and the potential impact on the environment. And that information will serve as a starting point for the public engagement process to solicit concerns from groups such as fishermen, the shipping industry and the tourism sector.

New Brunswick Energy Minister Jack Keir has thrown his support behind this green technology in the past but he has also raised concerns about the infancy of the tidal sector.

"The fact of the matter is this study will take a look at from an environmental point of view, shipping lines, the right whale issue, fishermen," Keir said.

"We want to have collaboration and discussion with all the stakeholders of the Bay of Fundy."

New Brunswick and Nova Scotia also bought into a tidal study last year conducted by the Palo Alto, California-based Electric Power Research Institute.

New Brunswick's portion of the EPRI study examined the tidal potential of eight different locations throughout the Bay of Fundy, eventually choosing Head Harbour Passage as the most ideal location for a test project.

The report estimated the 14-megawatt site could power between 5,000 to 11,000 homes.

The same company indicated Nova Scotia's Minas Passage has the best potential for harnessing tidal power and that site alone could generate enough electricity to power about 120,000 homes.

The ongoing partnership between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia on tidal power initiatives is helping to defray the initial costs associated with the developing technology but it also avoids duplication of mutually beneficial information.

The EPRI study pushed its own technology, but Keir said when he was in Scotland recently he saw almost 90 different forms of marine renewable power technology, each were trumpeted by their designers as the most advanced option.

Keir said these studies will put a series of proposals in front of policy makers so the best choices can be made.

Further, he said he is a strong believer that the Maritime provinces can collaborate more on energy matters.

Nova Scotia Energy Minister Bill Dooks said the inter-provincial partnership is paramount as the governments each assess the future options with tidal projects.

"A lot of work needs to be done before demonstration turbines can be put in the water, and New Brunswick is helping us move that work forward," Dooks said in a statement.

New Brunswick's Conservatives started the province on the tidal track by funding the EPRI study.

Now Tory MLA Bruce Northrup, the opposition's energy critic, said he is unsure why the Liberal government is pushing forward on increasing power generation when recent events, such as the closure of Miramichi's UPM mill, forecast a future decline in electricity demand.

"I think they should be doing the tidal study for sure, but if they are going to produce more power then something else has to close down, so what are they going to close down?"

"They haven't been specific about what they are going to close down," Northrup said.