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LIVE @ WEI 2024



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Phase 1 offshore permit cases must be 'priority'

Ensuring 4.2GW of Phase 1 offshore wind farms can get through the planning system should be a "national priority", delegates have been told. **p2**

Multi-site ORESS auctions on the cards in coming years

The Irish state is likely "a few years" away from offering multiple offshore wind plots for auction in the same round, WEI 2024 heard. **p2**

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Statkraft Ireland and UK managing director Kevin O'Donovan says more realism on 2030 targets is needed due to limited planning approvals. **p3**

Now the time to build for the future

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Dublin pledges grid and planning reform

The Irish government is committed to reforming the grid and planning systems to support the delivery of more wind projects, WEI 2024 has heard.

Finance Minister Michael McGrath told delegates on Day 2 of the Dublin conference there is an "urgency" to the energy transition.

"We need to speed up, and we will," he said, while declaring onshore wind will "continue to be one of the leading and cost-effective technologies" to support national climate targets.

McGrath touted his government's efforts in strengthening the sector, deeming grid investment and reform of the planning procedure as "essential".

On the former, he highlighted the identification of 16 reinforcement projects being brought forward as well as new renewables hubs.

When it comes to planning reform, he pointed to Housing Minister Darragh O'Brien's Planning Bill, introduced in August, and said the legislation will provide for greater clarity for critical infrastructure projects.



REFORM MESSAGE: Minister Michael McGrath Photo: Conor McCabe

"We are significantly enhancing resources" for planning, McGrath said, adding resources for An Bord Pleanala have been boosted.

Dublin's establishment of a specialised planning and environmental court will give judicial review challenges to renewables projects their own legal venue, and will give developers more clarity in the approvals process, he said.

The ongoing review of the National Planning Framework meanwhile illustrates the importance of a more efficient planning system, he said, and will produce "greater alignment" among the different levels of government when it comes to approving

renewable energy projects. McGrath acknowledged Ireland exists in a competitive market for international capital, and said the reorientation of private funds toward sustainable energy development is a key feature of his regular discussions with finance minister counterparts in Europe.

The state has issued some €10bn in green bonds as part of a new scheme, and McGrath said the European Union's Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation will assist in diverting investment capital toward sustainable projects.

No longer, he added, will the country be caught in a "boom and bust cycle" when it comes to infrastructure investments, owing to the establishment of the Infrastructure, Climate, and Nature Fund. The fund has €3bn ringfenced for decarbonisation and sustainable development.

The establishment of a sovereign wealth fund under the Future Ireland Fund will invest the government's budget surpluses into a "policy for investment".

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Irish utility ESB hits green data project milestone

Irish developer ESB has successfully proved the first element of its green data project which enables the real-time tracing of renewable matching from source to customer. The green data project is being implemented in partnership with Dell Technologies, VMware and EpiSensor.

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Offshore wind 'to add €38bn to Irish economy'

Achieving Ireland's 2050 offshore wind energy targets could be worth at least €38bn to the Irish economy, according to a new report launched at Wind Energy Ireland's Annual Conference in Dublin.

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Statkraft to roll out 3GW of Irish projects by 2030

Statkraft aims to build 3GW of renewable energy projects in Ireland by 2030, including its 500MW North Irish Sea Array (NISA) offshore wind project, as part of a new roadmap published this week.

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Ireland kicks off offshore wind policy consultation

Ireland's Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has launched a consultation on the Offshore Renewable Energy Future Framework Policy Statement.

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Phase 1 offshore permit cases must be 'priority'

Ensuring 4.2GW of Phase 1 offshore wind farms can get through the planning system should be a "national priority", WEI 2024 has heard.

SSE Renewables offshore development director Maria Ryan told delegates it is essential the six projects, four of which hold ORESS 1 deals, are supported when they enter permitting later this year.

She told the Dublin event planning bodies need more resources to be able to deal with the applications while grid must also be delivered to align with construction schedules.

"We can't have one without the other," she said.

The country needs all of the Phase 1 offshore wind farms to make a "decent dent" in the nation's 5GW by 2030 target.

SSE is pursuing development of the 800MW Arklow Bank 2 off County Wicklow, she told delegates,



APPEAL FOR SUPPORT:
Maria Ryan Photo: Conor McCabe

despite losing out in the ORESS 1 auction last year.

Ryan added she "can't overstate" how the project team has banded together since the tender loss to push the development forward and the scheme is now on a path to support the country's 2030 targets.

The focus, she said, must be on delivery. "That is what we will be judged on."

The upside is with more

delivery the country will support the climate change fight, reduce energy security vulnerability and support the economy, all while delivering value to consumers, Ryan said.

Longer term, she said the Phase 2.1 auction is critical to keep Ireland on track for 2030 and she welcomed government commitments for the 20GW by 2040 target.

She added the focus must now be on a concrete plan for the next decade with the future framework strategy, including details such as the locations of wind farms and auction designs, which are critical to supporting investors.

Meanwhile, Ryan said the country cannot afford to "lose a single megawatt" from the system. She called for greater enabling of life extension and repowering of existing onshore wind farms.

Multi-site ORESS auctions on the cards in coming years

The Irish state is likely "a few years" away from offering multiple offshore wind plots for auction in the same round, WEI 2024 heard.

Conor McCabe, the head of the International and Offshore Energy Division at Energy Department DECC, told delegates putting several so-called Designated Marine Planning Areas (DMAPs) on the block could be done once the state-led regime beds in.

"The day will come, but it is a new system and it has to get up and running," he said.

The state will identify a

900MW DMAP off the south coast in early to mid-March, McCabe added. It will be put up for auction later this year.

Acknowledging the desire for increased offshore opportunities, McCabe said the planning process is important, despite sometimes being slow.

"This idea that we just do one and then walk away and do the next one: that just can't happen," he said.

By the time of its launch in March, the DMAP will have taken around nine months, including what McCabe said was an extensive public consultation.

Developers hunt big grid upgrades

Onshore wind developers are seeking large-scale grid updates to unlock more development opportunities.

EDF Renewable business development manager JP Wallace called for a grid build out that will update a "20th Century" network.

Wallace said there are relatively easy steps the state can take to upgrade

infrastructure, including the upgrading of existing 220kV lines. He also called for better collaboration between developers and Eirgrid.

The second version of the grid operator's *Shaping our Electricity Future* blueprint is a good start, but additional investment is required if 2030 decarbonisation goals are to be met, he said.

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Statkraft Ireland and UK managing director **Kevin O'Donovan** (left) says more realism on 2030 targets is needed due to limited planning approvals

Q What is Statkraft's key message to delegates at WEI 2024?

A Ireland stands out as the European market that could be one of the first to reach 80% of total electricity demand from renewables. However, the last few years of limited planning approvals and upgrading of the grid system has meant we should be more realistic about the likelihood of hitting the 80% target by 2030. The projects are there; WEI's recent market survey showed more than enough sites in members' development pipelines. We hope the recent increase in resources and focus on onshore wind applications by An Bord Pleanala (ABP) reflects its future strategy (it approved approximately 500MW in the past three months). However, many hurdles remain – particularly the lack of strategic planning frameworks for overriding incorrect local county development plan wind strategies and setting realistic megawatt targets for each region.

Q What is Statkraft's message for politicians at the conference, including Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald who is speaking on day one?

A At her party's Ard Fheis last year, Mary Lou McDonald highlighted renewable energy pace and scale is vital for a modern Ireland, as is a planning system that's fit for purpose. On those points, we agree, so we were very pleased the long-awaited Planning and Development Bill was published in November. While the specific timelines set out in the Bill are good to see,

as is the fact that ABP is statutorily obliged to meet certain timelines, some are still too long and don't differ from the length of time projects stay in the current system.

Deputy McDonald has also previously cited green hydrogen, solar and offshore as being key to Ireland's energy revolution. They certainly will play a significant role, but we must also acknowledge the huge part onshore wind projects have played in getting it to a point where wind generated 35% of the entire island's electricity in 2023.

Q Can you give an update on Statkraft's onshore wind construction portfolio and what the plans are for this year's RESS round?

A Last year, we completed our first RESS 1 projects at Taghart and Cloghan. We currently have two more projects in construction, with work on the 58MW Moanvane and 56MW Cushaling progressing well. All turbines are installed at Moanvane in Offaly, with energisation scheduled to begin next month.

Cushaling, also in Offaly, is going well too, despite some unpredictable weather towards the end of 2023. Concrete pours started in early September; not long afterwards, there was an unseasonably warm spell, followed by heavy rain in October and a red alert in November. Despite these challenges, progress is good. In terms of RESS 4, we have several projects available to put forward. However, we will wait until closer to the time to assess the optimal route to market before making a final decision.

Q What does a grid fit for a renewables-powered future look like and what are the key elements of how the grid need to change?

A A fit-for-purpose grid would see a timely and simple process for getting a grid connection. It is critical, therefore, that locational signals are not included in Enduring Connection Policy 3 to deliver this. Developers should also have confidence in connection costs and timelines, removing the need to build significant contingency for associated risks into route-to-market bids.

Q In offshore, Statkraft has the NISA project in development. Can you outline the latest progress on this project as well as the implications of plans to create a protected zone in the area?

A NISA is in pre-application consultation with ABP at the moment, with a view to submitting a full planning application in early summer of this year. We expect it will take about 12 months for ABP to make its decision.

On the government's plans to create a protected zone in the NISA area, we have always been clear that protecting the environment is important to us, and it has been a massive consideration at every stage of the project. We have undertaken years of detailed ornithological surveys and assessments that confirm NISA will not have a negative impact on the existing environment.

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Now the time to build for the future

This time of the year is traditionally an opportunity for reflection and goal setting – for ensuring the coming year exceeds the last.

The past 12 months have seen significant steps towards achieving our green energy delivery goals in Ireland, but there is a lot more to do in the year ahead to set ourselves up for success.

Key to this is ensuring the delivery of the Phase 1 offshore projects. All six schemes intend to enter the planning system this year, including SSE Renewables' Arklow Bank Wind Park 2 – a critical milestone for our renewables ambitions.

These sites are the backbone of our 2030 targets and must be fully supported. We must ensure An Bord Pleanála continues to get the support it needs to enable it, and the relevant statutory consultees, to prioritise these crucial projects through the assessment phase. It is



SSE Renewables director of offshore development **Maria Ryan** (left) looks at the challenges facing the sector in Ireland, and how a spirit of co-operation can see industry rise to the occasion

essential the opportunity of these schemes is harnessed – not only for our net zero ambitions, but for the significant level of capital and regional investment, as well as associated job opportunities, offshore wind can create.

Also of critical importance is Eirgrid's delivery of the infrastructure needed to connect these developments in time to hit the 2030 targets.

Beyond Phase 1, and mindful of the current Future Framework consultation, it is positive to see the 20GW by 2040 target reaffirmed, and an indicative auction schedule published for the next five years. This framework must set our industry up for success – provide clarity around a forward pipeline of

projects and their locations to send a clear message to the scarce global supply chain; establish a process which allocates seabed and allows de-risking of sites before any subsidy auction; and design tender structures which deliver benefits to local industries and allow multiple schemes to clear.

But let us not forget the integral part onshore technology – wind, solar and storage – will play in supporting the country's decarbonisation goals. The former has been the foundation of the renewables story in Ireland and will continue play a critical role. We cannot afford to lose a single megawatt of energy and must continue to

leverage existing assets in the sector and prioritise life extension and repowering.

Planning reform, through the Planning and Development Bill, is a welcome step to unlock projects and provides us with an opportunity to align legislation with the climate imperative.

As we look to the accelerated delivery phase of infrastructure, we must also reflect on the industry's global macro-economic challenges.

High rates of inflation have led to increased cost of capital and additional pressure on supply-chain, and Ireland is not immune to these risks. But these obstacles are not insurmountable. Continued and sustained

government engagement and collaboration with industry can ensure delivery plans remain dynamic and adaptable to future headwinds.

Only a unified approach will do. The renewables industry must continue to discuss, support and collaborate with government and relevant stakeholders to ensure we can look back and say we got it right and delivered. ■

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