

‘Time to give the port a 21st-century tune up’: Harbor looks to sustainable investments

Harbor district, energy authority looking to create a ‘clean’ industry future with aquafarm, offshore wind energy



Harbor district executive director Larry Oetker, left, Lynette Mullen, an independent project manager working with Nordic Aquafarms, and Matthew Marshall, executive director of Redwood Coast Energy Authority, speak during a panel at College of the Redwoods on Friday. (Rob Peach — The Times-Standard)

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The Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District and the Redwood Coast Energy Authority outlined plans Friday at the Humboldt County Economic Development Summit for infrastructure upgrades on the Samoa peninsula to build a land-based aquafarm and offshore wind energy project with an anticipated completion date of 2025 or 2026 — renewable energy projects that could have a significant positive impact on the county’s workforce development.

Establishing offshore wind energy

Matthew Marshall, executive director of the energy authority, said the agency has teamed with several companies outside of the area to complete a 100- to 150-megawatt project comprised of 10 to 15 wind turbines 20 to 30 miles off the coast of Eureka.

“All of these companies are interested in moving the project forward here in Humboldt,” Marshall said, noting the energy authority is conscious of concerns for wildlife habitat and has been in contact with the Humboldt Fishermen’s Marketing Association to minimize the project’s impact on commercial fishing.

“(The offshore wind energy project) goes from federal waters through state waters onto the land so every possible permitting agency that exists has to say, ‘Yeah, okay, we’re okay with it,’” Marshall added. “And so you know while that makes the permitting process complex, it ensures a high likelihood the end result is going to be something that really addresses these concerns.”

The next steps for the offshore wind energy project involve undergoing the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management leasing process taking place over the next year, according to Marshall. The energy authority is meanwhile entering the second year of a study to determine the dynamics of the project’s connection to the onshore power grid.

“The goal is to have Humboldt Bay be the staging point and potentially not just for our project but for other projects on the West Coast. But ... some work needs to be done,” Marshall said.

Constructing an aquafarm

Lynette Mullen, a local project manager whose primary focus is economic development, spoke to the county’s collaboration with Nordic Aquafarms, a producer of land-based aquaculture, to build a self-contained fish farming facility on the site of the defunct pulp mill.

Mullen noted that 90% of the seafood in the U.S. is imported and 50% of that is farmed. With an estimated population growth of 60 to 80 million people over the next 30 years, Mullen said, we must manage and maintain existing fisheries resources, scale up aquaculture to meet the demands of growth — with which the wild fishing industry cannot keep up — and address environmental concerns with strict standards.

“I mean this is an economic development project like we haven’t seen here in years and years, so it’s very exciting,” said Mullen, who assured the public that the fully contained factory fish farm, equipped with its own wastewater treatment facility, will raise traceable product, from egg to full-grown fish, without antibiotics and without the threat of sea lice.

Mullen was enthusiastic about the “synergies with academic institutions” in the area, not only for research but for workforce development. The project will result in 80 direct jobs, not including the workforce development required for construction and engineering as well as what will be required to move product once farmed.

Nordic Aquafarms, which staked out the area for its clean water, is in a “due diligence” process now, Mullen said.

“It’s been really great to work with (Nordic) because they’re very sincere in wanting to understand the community and be transparent about every step of the process,” said Mullen.

Rebuilding port infrastructure

Larry Oetker, executive director of the harbor district, concluded the panel with a discussion of plans for the overhaul of the port space necessary for housing the aquafarm facility and for facilitating the offshore wind energy project — an initiative with an estimated cost of \$400 million.

He began by highlighting the advantages of the Humboldt Bay port system, comprised of 1,000 acres of coastal-dependent industrial lands, much of which is “vacant” and “underutilized,” and which is only three hours away from access to a web of national highways.

“We’re a world-class port,” Oetker began. “A lot of times, we don’t think about it being a world-class port, but we are.”

Much of the development the harbor district is aiming for hinges on Samoa’s “renovation and expansion,” said Oetker, who reported the town is ready to subdivide all existing homes as part of a Coastal Commission-approved “master plan” for updated infrastructure: new sewer, water and fire lines; a new business park; and a “brand-new” wastewater treatment plant on the peninsula. Oetker said there can be no new development without these infrastructure upgrades.

He referred to what the harbor district calls “Redwood Marine Terminal 1” — the first dock on the left past the Samoa bridge — as the site of the wind energy project. The “Redwood Marine Terminal 2” is the site of the old pulp mill that will be leased to Nordic Aquafarms. Oetker noted the old mill site is ideal for the aquafarm because it already has an ocean-drainage system in place that is well-suited to the mechanics of fish farming.

“The assets on this place are just amazing and they’re tailor-made for the aquaculture industry,” he said.

Nordic will be responsible for and pick up the costs of decontaminating the mill grounds, including the demolition of the tall buildings and smokestacks on the site. The district is looking to build “aquaculture clusters” on these sites, which will currently

house 22 tenants, or coastal dependent business operations such as Nordic, Pacific Flake, Taylor Seafood, among others.

According to Oetker, the offshore wind energy project alone would produce “14,000 direct construction and operation jobs” and generate “\$20 to \$50 billion in gross domestic product for the state from construction, operations and functions.”

As for the projected \$400 million price tag on port upgrades, Oetker and Mullen both referred to it as an “investment” that, Oetker said, creates a “significant tax base for our community.”

“Our aging infrastructure is in severe decline and we need to attract clean, modern industry that’s going to be here for the next 20, 30, 50 years,” Oetker said, ending his presentation with an injunction: “It’s time to give the port a 21st-century tune up!”

What’s next

The panel is confident in the proposed projects — as sources of revenue for the county, as methods to build a strong and sustainable workforce comprised of partnerships between developers and local businesses as well as area academic institutions, and as a way to ultimately reduce the county’s carbon footprint. In the meantime, public involvement is indispensable.

In terms of impacts on the commercial fishing industry, which was a concern voiced during public comment, the panel agreed that it would be minimal.

“With these kinds of scales ... we can actually improve the industry and give (fishermen) access to markets that they currently don’t have because they’re too diversified,” said Oetker.

Mullen reiterated that the aquafarm project will not displace the wild fishing industry; instead it will displace the farming culture.

“(Nordic) is not looking to compete with the wild-caught salmon market,” she said, adding the aim is to build “aquaculture clusters focused on farming.”

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