

# A Charge in the Air

*Alternative energy plans trigger heated debates*

**W**hen South Texas fishing guide Walt Kittelberger founded the Lower Laguna Madre Foundation in the 1990s, it was to fight would-be developers on South Padre Island. Then he and his group took on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over dredging.

Now, Kittelberger and his fellow advocates have a new foe: two wind-power farms that Kittelberger says could forever alter the shores of Laguna Madre, a shallow lagoon along 100 miles of South Texas coast known for its fishing and birding. “It would change a pristine rural environment into an industrial zone,” he predicts.

## COASTAL ALTERNATIVES

Coastal residents from California to Florida are accustomed to oil drillers seeking purchase off their shores. Thanks to rising energy prices and the new emphasis on domestic energy independence, residents now face an expanding list of other energy producers eyeing beaches or local waters. Wind-farm companies may be the best known, thanks to the pitched battle over the 130-turbine Cape Wind in Nantucket Sound. But other coastal energy projects in the offing include huge liquefied natural gas terminals, intended to process natural gas imported on international cargo ships, and wave energy farms, which use turbines to harvest energy from waves and currents.

Some, especially in longtime energy states such as Texas and Louisiana, welcome the new producers as sources of jobs and revenues. But others oppose local coastal energy projects on environmental, aesthetic, or safety grounds.

With members on both sides, the

American Shore & Beach Preservation Association, a national coastal protection group, has not endorsed or opposed any one energy project or industry. But coastal energy production “is becoming more and more of an issue for us,” says Harry Simmons, president.

Babcock & Brown and PPM Energy are pursuing two wind farms in South Texas’ sparsely populated Kennedy County that together would contain hundreds of 400-foot tall wind turbines. With the best energy-producing winds in the country’s interior, the project would be one of only a handful of land-based coastal farms nationwide, says Laurie Jodziewicz, a policy manager with the American Wind Energy Association. But several large offshore wind farms have been proposed, including Cape Wind in Massachusetts, and at least one each off the New York and Delaware coasts.

## ENERGY DEMANDS

The population density on the coast is a double-edged sword for wind-energy producers: while it may mean opposition from local residents, the higher population increases the demand for electricity, says Jodziewicz. “People are located near the coast, so you don’t have to move the power as far,” she says. “Bigger transmission lines can be more expensive.”

Wind-farm opponents have labeled them “avian Cuisinarts,” saying local and migrating birds strike and are killed by their rotating turbines. For offshore farms, concerns range from marred beachfront views to encroachments on fishing grounds. For onshore ones, opponents complain that road building carves up rural lands. That and the threat to birds migrating north across the Gulf are



SANDIA NATIONAL LABORATORIES © ECI, G. BOULOUIGOURIS

**Industrial wasteland?** Critics contend that wind farms, like this one off the coast of Denmark, are environmental disasters. Advocates consider them a beautiful site compared with the ravages induced by climate change.

both concerns for Kittelberger, who has joined other advocates in filing two lawsuits over the Texas farms. “For us the single biggest thing is the enormity of their footprint,” he says.

Jodziewicz responds that high bird fatalities seen with the earliest wind farms have fallen off in newer, better-placed ones. And the companies plan to take measures to limit the danger to migrating birds, she says. As for onshore development, the turbines typically require only small gravel roads and may even increase shoreline access for recreational fishers, she notes.

Similar debates are only becoming more common on the coast, and not just over wind farms. Dozens of liquefied natural gas terminals have been proposed along the Gulf and East Coast, and fishermen have already raised concerns about large-scale wave energy farms. “What I’ve learned,” says Kittelberger, “is to not underestimate them. They are coming.” — Aaron Hoover

# Recession Means Decline

*Deciphering the effects of a slump*

**W**hile coastal populations remain some of the densest in the country, population growth in the Southeast's coastal states has slowed, leading some to wonder if hurricanes, insurance, and higher taxes are reversing Americans' decades-old affection for warm Atlantic shores.

But demographers say the housing downturn is probably the leading cause of slumping growth in Florida and slowing growth in neighboring states reported by the Census Bureau in its most recent estimate of annual state population changes.

"I attribute at least some of it to the housing market slump and the difficulty of getting credit for people who want to move to a new place," says William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution.

The Census numbers show Florida's population grew 1.07% between July of 2006 and 2007, down from 1.81% during the same period the previous year — the biggest drop since at least 2000. Georgia's population growth rate slowed from 2.57% to 2.16%, while the rate stabilized in North and South Carolina after speeding dramatically in 2005. On the Gulf Coast, growth slowed in Texas and Alabama and went from negative to positive in Louisiana and Mississippi, but the latter numbers reflected people returning to the states after losses following Hurricane Katrina.

Florida's population grew by 193,735 residents from July of 2006 through last July. Still, that was way down from 321,481 the year before — spurring a spate of news and editorials contending that Florida is losing its luster.

But Stan Smith, director of the University of Florida's Bureau of



NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Business and Economic Research, says that while fears of hurricanes, Florida's spiraling insurance rates, and property tax burdens could be partly to blame, the housing slowdown is probably the leading cause. "In previous times, during recessions, the migration to Florida slowed considerably," Smith says.

Demographers elsewhere in the Southeast also ranked housing as important.

Bill Tillman, North Carolina's state demographer, says the state had not experienced the same housing boom as Florida and as a result was not seeing as pronounced a slowdown in population growth. To the contrary, unlike in Florida and elsewhere, applications for building permits in North Carolina went up in 2007.

Judy Hadley, a demographer with

Georgia's Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, ties the Peach State's slowing growth to the "current housing issues."

But she adds the Census Bureau had also changed its methodology this year, reducing estimated growth numbers across the board. She says Georgia's six coastal counties continue a long-standing growth trend.

Most demographers are optimistic about their states' outlooks, though Hadley notes that Georgia needs to find solutions to a current water crisis if it expects to continue growing — something increasingly true in neighboring states as well. Frey emphasizes the Southeast will remain attractive because of its warm weather, comparatively inexpensive, newly built homes, and friendliness to industry. — A.H.

While housing slumps and population growth declines, the coast never quite loses its appeal.