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FILE - In this Aug. 15, 2016 file photo, three wind turbines from the Deepwater Wind project stand off Block Island, R.I. Ørsted U.S. Offshore Wind, a division of a Denmark-based developer, is opening a hub on Monday, March 2, 2020, in Providence, R.I., that its executives hope will help accelerate the takeoff of the industry in the United ...

Photo: Michael Dwyer / Associated Press

The economic slowdown brought on by the coronavirus crisis has some renewable energy advocates making dire forecasts about the industry's future.

The Solar Energy Industries Association predicted last month the sector could lose nearly half its workforce – up to 120,000 of its nearly 250,000 jobs – because of the crisis. And a recently released report from a consortium of environmental and energy groups revealed more than 106,000 renewable energy jobs were lost nationally in the month of March alone.

Connecticut has 2,234 solar industry jobs, according to the most recent report by the Solar Foundation, a national group promoting the sector.

Experts said the pandemic is having an impact on the industry in Connecticut, but said it is too soon to say how bad the problem eventually will be.

“I think it depends on how long this lasts,” said Mike Trahan, executive director of Solar Connecticut, an industry trade group. “Right now, from a practical standpoint, it's a serious impediment.”

Joel Gordes, a West Hartford-based energy consultant, said the biggest problem currently is people's fear of contracting the coronavirus from service workers, even though their work is performed outdoors.

"A lot of people don't want anyone at their homes, even if they are only working on your roof," Gordes said. "I don't know if I'd call that a long term problem."

Since the onset of the virus and the quarantine restrictions that followed, Trahan said industry and state officials have developed a new set of protocols that allow exterior work to continue on residential solar projects. Any work associated with going into people's homes to hook up rooftop solar panels is being put off until a later date.

Robert McCullough is among those who doesn't expect the coronavirus-induced slowdown to have a long-term impact on Connecticut's renewable energy sector.

McCullough is a principal in McCullough Research, a Portland, Oregon-based energy consulting firm.

“The cost of renewable energy is lower than it has ever been and continues to decrease rapidly,” McCullough said. “It’s unlikely that we’ll see the renewable energy sector suffer any long term impact.”

While factories and other major power users remain idled or operating at less than capacity, “we’re going to have a lot of surplus energy out there, which drives down the price,” he said.

In an effort to boost the amount of wind power in Connecticut’s energy portfolio, lawmakers have approved efforts focused on procuring it. The first procurement for up to 200 megawatts of power was completed at the end of 2018; wind projects that were selected signed long-term power contracts with The United Illuminating Co. and Eversource Energy in early 2019.

A second request for proposals went out last year. Winning proposals were selected, but long-term contracts are still being negotiated with UI and Eversource.

Officials at the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection said Friday they don’t expect the coronavirus-related slowdown

to prevent the wind projects from being ready on time to comply with the terms of the agreements with UI and Eversource.

“The projects selected by Connecticut in the various RFPs are not expected to come online for a few years,” agency officials said in a statement.

“Importantly, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) has indicated it still plans to issue its review of the cumulative impacts of projects in federal waters off of the Atlantic Coast in December 2020.

Assuming that BOEM sticks to this schedule, DEEP has no reason to believe that the projects it has selected in various RFPs will not achieve commercial operation on their expected dates or within the contractually permitted extensions.”

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