HealthLink

Linking Health and the Environment

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Our Mission:

To protect and improve public health by reducing and eliminating pollutants and toxic substances from our environment through research, education, and community action.

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February 10, 2004

Susan Tierney, Chair
Massachusetts Ocean Task Force
Executive Office of Environmental Affairs
251 Causeway Street
Boston, MA 02114

Dear Ms. Tierney,

HealthLink is a 1,500 member citizens action organization based in Marblehead, MA, dedicated to educating the public and our political representatives about the health and environmental impacts of polluting power plants. Healthlink also works to support the enforcement of regulations to clean up polluting power plants and to develop clean renewable sources of energy. HealthLink appreciates this opportunity to comment on the Task Force's Draft Principles and Recommendations.

The Principles identified by the Task Force are laudable ideals for state oceans management though they are incomplete in addressing the greatest challenge our ocean waters face, which is environmental degradation from the burning of fossil fuels. The specific recommendations of the Task Force are more problematic in that they give the state greater authority to stop or impede the siting of the very technologies that can help protect our state waters from continuing degradation from fossil fuel power plants, namely, offshore renewable energy.

Threats to Massachusetts coastal waters from local, regional and multi-regional fossil fuel power plants

Direct contamination from improperly managed power plant waste
In 2000, HealthLink and the Conservation Law Foundation entered into an enforceable agreement with the owners of the Salem Harbor coal and oil burning power plant requiring them to discontinue disposing of solid and liquid coal and oil combustion wastes into unlined storage lagoons which had been found to be contaminating the groundwater below. That contaminated groundwater is almost certainly leaching into Salem Harbor as the site is adjacent to the harbor.

Thermal discharge
Several Massachusetts coastal power plants discharge water into Massachusetts coastal waters significantly warmer than the ocean it enters. This is most severe at the Brayton Point power plant in Somerset, MA which discharges into Mount Hope Bay. The US Environmental Protection Agency has determined that the cumulative impact of decades of this thermal discharge has devastated the fish population of Mount Hope Bay and severely impacted fishing in that area.

Atmospheric Nitrogen Deposition
The negative impacts of nitrogen loading into Massachusetts coastal waters are well documented. Toxic algae blooms are but one manifestation of excess nitrogen loading into Massachusetts bays and estuaries which has removed significant areas of habitat for many species of flora and fauna. While most attention on mitigating this problem has focused on coastal runoff, what is often overlooked is that up to 40% of nitrogen loading into Massachusetts coastal waters is from atmospheric deposition resulting from fossil fuel burning, including fossil fuel power plants.

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Atmospheric Mercury Deposition
Nationwide, fossil fuel power plants are the largest source of atmospheric mercury deposition. Mercury bioaccumulates in the ocean food chain resulting in high mercury concentrations in several of the most popular types of seafood including swordfish and tuna. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health has included canned tuna fish in the types of fish it recommends that sensitive populations including pregnant women and children restrict their consumption of. Mercury can cause brain damage, and is particularly dangerous for fetuses and young children.

Global Warming and Climate Change
The greatest threat to Massachusetts coastal waters is climate change. The very contour of our coastline and all of the life in the ocean off our coastline are threatened by a warming, expanding, and rising ocean. It is hard to imagine a solution to this global problem that would not include concerted action by communities most dependent on their coastlines to restrict their own emissions of greenhouse gasses. The largest sector of greenhouse gas emissions in the US is fossil fuel power plants. It is not surprising that the Pew Ocean Commission reached the conclusion that… "The Commission feels strongly that the U.S. and its global neighbors must do the one thing that can directly limit the effects of climate change on the marine environment – reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases that contribute to this problem. Only then can we assure coming generations and ourselves that the recommendations we offer will yield the bountiful seas we envision."

Ocean Management Task Force Recommendations

It is troubling that the Draft Principles and Preliminary Recommendations do not identify the threats of fossil fuel power plants to Massachusetts coastal waters. Instead, it appears that they seek to restrict development of the very technologies designed to help reduce those threats. As part of the Massachusetts restructuring act of 1997 the Massachusetts Legislature put in place a Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS). This RPS has mandated that four percent of the Commonwealth's energy come from new renewable sources by 2009. We understand from the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's six month stakeholder process on offshore wind that this goal can only be reached by utilizing our offshore renewable resources including wind, wave and tidal power. Of these three technologies, only wind power is technologically and economically advanced enough to provide significant amounts of clean renewable electricity. Therefore, we strongly recommend that the recommendations made by the task force encourage the swift development of this important technology.

Recommendation #5
Recommendation #5 states that fees for use of offshore uses licensed under Chapter 91 are "artificially low" and that, "[t]he fees should be revised to better reflect the economic value of these public trust lands and the impacts on the regulated activities on the public's ocean resources, with the revenues from these fees dedicated for ocean related purposes". Healthlink agrees that appropriate fees should be charged for offshore uses of public lands. However, we would also recommend that in relation to fees charged for offshore use, the Commonwealth consider basing their rates not only on the economic value of the project but also on the societal value of a project. The recommendations should seek to encourage projects such as offshore wind, by imposing reasonable fees for use of public lands, just as the federal government supports renewable energy with a tax credit and the fossil fuel industry with various other forms of financial support.

Recommendation #6
Recommendation #6 states, "The Commonwealth…should develop and implement methodologies and standards for analysis – and if possible, mitigation – of visual, cultural, and aesthetic impacts of proposed projects to be sited and permitted in the state's ocean resources." We at Healthlink are outraged that this recommendation would be prioritized and mentioned in the absence of a much larger threat of climate change and sea level rise. Concerns surrounding 'visual, cultural, and aesthetic impacts of projects' are most commonly associated with potential

impacts on tourism, property values and general enjoyment of coastal resources. We suggest that the impacts on all of these resources are threatened to a much greater degree by climate change then by proposed development of offshore renewable resource designed specifically to mitigate these impacts. Indeed, if consideration of ocean aesthetics is to be part of this report at all, it should also include those projects located on land which are also within sight of the ocean that boaters must also look at.

In addition, Healthlink notes there is at least one member on the Task Force, Michael Egan, who may have a self interest in preserving the 'view' from his family's waterfront property in Osterville. Mr. Egan's participation, along with that of Larry Wheatley who ran an unsuccessful campaign for State Representative on the basis of his personal aesthetic opposition to the Cape Wind proposal, further call into question the real purpose of Recommendation #6.

Conclusion

Healthlink has been working extensively to enforce clean-up of the state's 'Filthy Five' power plants. In order to scale back our dependence on environmentally harmful fossil fuels we must make a meaningful transition to clean renewable energy sources. We are hopeful that the Task Force's revised document will contain more Principles and Recommendations geared toward addressing climate change and the promising development of offshore wind power. In addition we would also like to see the task force specifically address the impacts of fossil fuel power plants on coastal resources including power plant waste, mercury deposition, discharging of heated 'cooling' water, and nitrogen loading.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment and we look forward to further participation in the development of the recommendations.

Sincerely,

Jane K. Bright and Lori Ehrlich
On behalf of HealthLink Board of Directors