

# Icebreaker Wind project halted, no plans to resurrect effort to put wind turbines in Lake Erie

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**CLEVELAND, Ohio** – A pilot project to bring wind power to Lake Erie has been put on hold amid rising costs and other challenges that have delayed progress and dimmed its chances of success.

The Lake Erie Energy Development Corp., which several years ago seemed destined to achieve its goal to put six wind turbines in Lake Erie about eight miles off Cleveland, stated Friday it has “made the difficult decision to temporarily halt the Icebreaker Wind project.”

Icebreaker was to be the first freshwater wind farm in North America and a test to see if turbines could withstand the rigors of a frozen lake. Advocates envisioned many more turbines in the Great Lakes over time and an entire industry built around the renewable form of energy.

The project would have been groundbreaking, and LEEDCo had made significant progress toward its goal before it came crashing down. The firm partnered with a prominent Norwegian wind developer to bring the project to fruition and obtained all the permits needed to proceed.

But challenges from bird lovers and a lawsuit funded in part by a coal company managed to delay the project long enough to push away the developer and for rising interest rates to drive up the cost materials and construction.

“Given the set of circumstances right now we don’t have a way to push things forward unless something changes,” Will Friedman, a LEEDCo board member and president and CEO of the Port of Cleveland, told cleveland.com and the Plain Dealer.

Friedman said about \$37 million is left from a \$50 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to develop Icebreaker but now the money is in the process of being returned to the federal government.

Despite Friday’s announcement, LEEDCo and its supporters have not given up hope.

“I maintain my belief that - just as Ohio was the first in flight - the day will come when Ohio will be a leader in advanced energy,” said LEEDCo Chairman Ronn Richard in a written statement.

“I am disappointed by this pause on Icebreaker, but I believe that there will be a significant number of offshore wind turbines in the Great Lakes in my lifetime. Climate change will necessitate it.”

## The beginning

The push to put wind turbines in the lake goes back about two decades when Richard, then-CEO of the Cleveland Foundation, promoted the benefits of wind power to battle growing concerns with climate change and to address the vulnerability of the country’s electrical grid.

In 2005, wind-monitoring equipment was placed on Cleveland’s water-intake crib offshore and conditions were found to be favorable for wind turbines. In 2013, soil samples were obtained and pressure tests conducted for use in designing the appropriate turbine and foundation for Icebreaker.

By 2016, an engineering consultant hired to analyze the lakebed, confidently told cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer that Icebreaker had evolved from something that “could happen” to something that “will happen.” That same year, LEEDCo began working with Fred. Olsen, a Norwegian wind energy developer. The future for wind power in Lake Erie looked bright.

## **Opposition mounted**

But important approvals were still needed, including from the Ohio Power Siting Board, and that's when crippling delays began. The board's staff gave Icebreaker the thumbs up in July of 2018 although a plan to monitor the turbines' impact on birds and bats still had to be approved.

In the meantime, opponents of Icebreaker became more active. The Lake Erie Marine Trades Association registered its disapproval while the Lake Erie Foundation called for a deeper and more independent analysis of environmental concerns.

"None of us are against wind turbines," foundation board member John Lipaj said at the time. "We're saying because this project has such huge ramifications for Lake Erie forever that we just need to slow this thing down and research this the right way."

The American Bird Conservancy and Black Swamp Bird Observatory also opposed Icebreaker, although the Sierra Club and the Ohio Environmental Council were supporters.

The siting board eventually granted Icebreaker a permit in 2020 but with a provision that prevented the turbines from operating at night between March 1 and Nov. 1 to limit the risk to birds and bats.

## **Randazzo's push against the project**

Sam Randazzo, then-chairman of the Ohio Power Siting Board, pushed for the restriction despite testimony from state experts that a nighttime shutdown was not necessary.

LEEDCo objected, saying such a restriction would make the project economically unworkable. The restriction was reversed later in the year after 32 Northeast Ohio lawmakers complained in a letter to Randazzo that the board's action was unlawful.

Randazzo, who also served as chairman of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio at the time, was recently indicted in connection with a bribery scheme involving FirstEnergy and House Bill 6, which bailed out nuclear and coal power plants while limiting green-energy mandates.

## **Legal delays**

After the siting board's permit reversal, LEEDCo's battles were still not over. Not willing to except the decision, two Bratenahl residents filed a lawsuit claiming the siting board did not obtain enough information about the risk to birds and bats to render its decision. It was revealed that Murry Energy Corp., a coal company that filed bankruptcy in 2019, helped pay for expert testimony and plaintiff legal fees.

While the matter was pending, LEEDCo tried to line up more financing but was unsuccessful. An effort to convince the Ohio legislature to tack a tiny surcharge onto Northeast Ohio power bills to help pay for Icebreaker was rejected by Republicans.

Better news for LEEDCo came in August of 2022 when the Ohio Supreme Court ruled, 6-1, that the siting board had collected enough research for construction of Icebreaker to begin. The news prompted Richard to say Icebreaker had been given "a new lease on life." But by then the damage to the project had been done.

The uncertainty had made it next to impossible for LEEDCo to find potential buyers of the electricity Icebreaker would generate and the delays had prompted the Norwegian developer to rethink its commitment to the project. It eventually dropped out, Friedman said.

## **The future**

Now, with no developer and no grant from the Energy Department to rely on, LEEDCo finds itself in a difficult spot to move forward. Not only that, but higher interest rates have made the project unattractive to other potential developers. And if one does come along, and the project is resurrected, advances in technology would likely require amendments to various permits, Friedman said.

It's disappointing but not surprising to learn that Icebreaker has been suspended, said Greg Nemet, a University of Wisconsin public affairs professor who tracks renewable energy projects.

The first of anything, which Icebreaker would have been, is more difficult to achieve, he said, plus current economic conditions have become a drag, even causing a couple of proposed wind farms along the Atlantic Coast to be cancelled.

But the Great Lakes holds too much promise for the harnessing of wind power, he said, and he suspects there will be another attempt to put turbines in the lake, either by LEEDCo or somebody else.

"I don't think this is the last shot," he said.