

Clean megaprojects divide surprise group: Environmentalists

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It is the first time that data has been used at a national scale to judge how the beauty of the environment impacts onshore windfarm development. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Sprawling wind farms located off the coast. Hydropower transmission

lines that cut through some of America's most beloved forests and rivers. Solar megaprojects of unprecedented size.

As President Joe Biden's administration plans to fight climate change by weaning the nation off [fossil fuels](#), these large-scale renewable energy projects are the source of conflict within a seemingly unlikely group: environmentalists.

America's patchwork of environmental and [conservation groups](#)—encompassing players such as public lands advocates, animal welfare proponents and hunting organizations—have disparate opinions about new renewable energy infrastructure and its trade-offs. While all agree on the need for clean power sources, there are deep disputes about the wisdom of projects that will impose their own impact on the environment.

Some argue projects like the planned 800-megawatt Vineyard Wind offshore wind project off New England would kill birds. Others complain that undertakings such as the proposed Champlain Hudson Power Express clean power cable, which could start construction this year in New York, would result in losses to valuable ecosystems.

Additional projects, including the approved \$1 billion Gemini solar and battery storage project about 30 miles (48 kilometers) northeast of Las Vegas, have sparked debate about whether they are simply too big.

In Maine, a \$1 billion hydropower electricity transmission corridor called the New England Clean Energy Connect would cut through sparsely populated western woods where moose reign as the state's iconic creatures. Environmental groups disagree about whether the 145-mile (233 kilometer) corridor comes at too high a cost in loss of trees and wildlife habitat.

A grassroots group, Say No to NECEC, calls the project an "unmitigated disaster" for Maine. But Conservation Law Foundation, a leading [environmental group](#) based in Boston, praised the fact that the project would reduce fossil fuel reliance in New England.

"There are going to be hard choices that are going to need to be made as we try to address the climate crisis," said Sean Mahoney, the foundation's executive vice president and director of its Maine Advocacy Center.

Biden has set a goal of 100% renewable energy in the power sector by 2035. That would require significant expansion of the nation's clean energy sources such as wind, solar and hydro power—about a sixth of today's U.S. electricity generation.

Reaching the goal would require approval of large renewables projects, such as the Champlain Hudson cable, which would deliver 1,000 megawatts of hydropower to the New York City area. That's enough to power about a million homes.

The project would require a 333-mile (536 kilometer) buried transmission line, partly under Lake Champlain and the Hudson River. Yet some conservation advocates such as Bill Wellman, the hydro chair of the New York State Council of Trout Unlimited, support the project.

The environmental impacts are simply evidence that there's "no such thing as a free lunch, particularly when it comes to power or the environment," Wellman said, adding that the \$2.2 billion project includes \$117 million for habitat restoration.

But Margaret Sheehan, coordinator of North American Megadam Resistance Alliance, opposes the project and says environmentalists who support it "turn a blind eye to the devastating impacts." Sheehan noted

that it would involve digging in "iconic Lake Champlain" and potentially disrupting endangered sturgeon habitat in the Hudson River.

Environmentalists have clashed over large-scale renewable energy projects for years.

The late Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, who had decades of environmental credentials, used his political clout in the 2000s to help prevent the Cape Wind wind farm from rising off the shores of his home state. The project was abandoned by 2017.

While opponents feared big turbines would kill birds and ruin views, others such as Mass Audubon felt the project would ultimately help birds by reducing fossil fuel emissions. Audubon, a group synonymous with bird conservation, has said it supports "properly sited" wind power because fossil fuel emissions drive climate change that threatens many bird species.

Today's environmental movement might benefit from having a White House ally in Biden, who has made green energy job growth a key piece of his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan.

However, with large projects likely on the way, environmentalists will need to accept tradeoffs, said Adam Rome, a professor of environment and sustainability at the University at Buffalo and an expert on the environmental movement.

"There will always be environmentalists that say, 'No, no, no,'" Rome said. "But they're not the dominant voice, and they're not the only voice now. And being practical doesn't mean it's not painful."

Recent history shows there is political will to move forward with clean energy projects even when environmentalists offer resistance. The

Trump administration issued final approval last year for the largest solar energy project in the U.S.—the Gemini project in the Mojave desert, which is expected to produce enough electricity to power 260,000 households and annually offset the greenhouse emissions of about 83,000 cars.

Environmentalists have long touted solar, but have been divided about whether this one should be built because some fear it could damage threatened Mojave desert tortoise habitat. The environmental group Basin and Range Watch has characterized the project as "badly sited."

The high environmental, financial and political stakes of such megaprojects sometimes make for strange alliances.

In Maine, for example, three companies that operate fossil fuel-powered plants in the region have teamed with the state's biggest environmental organization, the Natural Resources Council of Maine, to fight the billion-dollar hydropower transmission project.

The power plant owners have contributed to Mainers for Local Power, which has raised more than \$6 million to oppose the project. Based on projected lower hydropower costs, competing fossil fuel plants stand to lose hundreds of millions of dollars.

Meanwhile, Central Maine Power, the utility's parent company and Hydro Quebec have spent more than \$30 million to support the transmission line.

It's important for environmentalists on opposing sides of the [project](#) to remember they're playing for the same team, said Anya Fetcher, state director for Environment Maine, which opposes the corridor and favors offshore wind for clean energy generation.

"The argument I hear from individuals and organizations alike that are not opposed to it is, 'Well, we need to do something'," Fetcher said. "And we do need to do something. But it's time to say, 'We've got to invest in bigger steps'."

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