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Researchers want public feedback on tidal-energy study

Environmentally friendly technology in early stages

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What is being described as a large piece of Nova Scotia's energy puzzle took another step forward recently, with the release of a study examining tidal energy in the Bay of Fundy.

The Offshore Energy Environmental Research Association, a not-for-profit corporation, is accepting written feedback before the end of February for its report to the province's Energy Department.

Research and testing of the technology by the association and its stakeholders could take time because the methods are new, and little is known about the Bay of Fundy ecosystems.

"We're cautiously optimistic about this," said Jennifer Graham, member of the association's stakeholders' board and a coastal co-ordinator with the Ecology Action Centre.

"We're all at the same stage, trying to find out as much as we can and trying to move forward."

The association is exploring tidal in-stream energy conversion, which is in very early stages of development.

It is working with the New Brunswick Energy Department, and has received funding from Nova Scotia's Energy Department for the project.

The environmentally friendly technology would be a renewable alternative to the coal-based energy that now provides about 70 per cent of the province's electrical power.

By 2009, the association hopes to establish a demonstration centre at the bay where the technology can be tested, said Lesley Griffiths, lead researcher for the Fundy tidal energy strategic environmental assessment.

"If you put these turbines into the water, they don't know how much these currents will affect the machine. It's going to be an ongoing process over a number of years."

A recent environmental assessment report from Nova Scotia-based consultants Jacques Whitford highlights many "data gaps," such as issues with fisheries, marine birds and mammals and tourism, which still have to be researched.

"In the spring, we'll identify if those gaps are serious enough," said Joshua Leon, a member of the association's advisory group. "To say a particular gap is serious and people are uncomfortable, then it could hold (the project) up for years."

Tidal in-stream energy conversion, in particular, is the group's main focus now because it will be the most advanced technology. And unlike other options, such as tidal lagoon energy, it won't leave permanent structures in place after the testing process, Graham said.

If the tests can be done soon in the bay, she said, more light will be shed on how well tidal in-stream energy conversion could work with some of the world's strongest tides.

"We can test these on a relatively small scale," Graham said. "The places where they've been testing so far don't have the tides of the Bay of Fundy."