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Robots to study fish, turbines

Research to find out if sea life is able to avoid subsea tidal power generators

By JUDY MYRDEN Business Reporter
Wed, Oct 28 - 4:46 AM

Robots will soon be secured to the bottom of the ocean floor to see if fish detect or avoid a huge subsea tidal turbine soon to be tested in the Bay of Fundy.

The study is one of eight research projects to receive \$1.1 million in provincial government funding announced Tuesday for tidal marine energy research in the bay.

"We're excited about it because it promises to be the most comprehensive package of research on tidal marine energy basically anywhere," said Wayne St. Amour, executive director of Offshore Energy Environmental Research and Offshore Energy Technical Research.

"Once the research is concluded, it will give us the most in-depth understanding on these knowledge gaps."

Scientists from these two independent, non-profit organizations in Halifax are keen to study the effects of harnessing the immense power of the Bay of Fundy tides for electricity.

The funded projects cover a wide range of research areas, including tidal resource assessment, sediment, animal behaviour, potential effects of ice and debris, and potential effects of tidal lagoons.

The research projects are expected to be completed within two to three years, and will provide "a big picture sense" of what this kind of energy project is going to mean to the ecosystem, said Mr. St. Amour.

Tidal turbines generate electricity much like wind turbines. Tides flowing in and out of the bay rush past the submerged turbines, spinning them to produce a current. The energy is then routed by a cable to land, where it enters the power grid.

On Monday, Nova Scotia Power and its partner, OpenHydro of Ireland, tested their open-centred turbine in Bedford Basin before it makes a journey to the Bay of Fundy, where it will be launched in November. Testing there will last up to two years.

The demonstration turbine and subsea base are 16 metres in diameter, almost as high as a six-storey building. As proposed, it could produce one megawatt of electricity, enough to power 300 households.

The turbine cost \$10 million, with NSP investing the biggest share and \$4.6 million coming from Sustainable Development Technology Canada, a non-profit green energy foundation.

Next spring, two other turbines will be deployed in the bay.

The other two developers — Clean Current Power Systems Inc. of British Columbia and Minas Basin Pulp and Power Co. Ltd. of Hantsport — are planning to install their underwater devices after a cable is in place to carry the electricity.

Acadia University biology professor Michael Dadswell argues that a large-scale development of tidal power in the Bay of Fundy will do "immense damage" to the fishery and whale-watching businesses in the Maritimes. He recently wrote an opinion piece stating the rotating turbine blades will harm marine mammals, including seals and whales.

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