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North Cornwall scheme offers hope that tide is turning for marine power

Elisabeth Jefferies

Britain's biggest wave power test site is to be established ten miles off the coast of north Cornwall.

Wave Hub will consist of an area measuring 4km by 2km in which wave power developers can arrange several of their own devices and connect them to the power grid.

Companies that have been chosen to use the £28 million Wave Hub — a project run by the South West of England Regional Development Agency — include Ocean Power Technologies, Fred Olsen, of Norway, and WestWave, a consortium of E.ON, the German energy giant, and Ocean Prospect.

The cables, undersea socket and other infrastructure funded by the development agency will provide the necessary testing space for the devices.

The development, which was given planning permission yesterday, marks a new stage for marine power, the youngest addition to the renewable energy family and the least developed. Some tests on harnessing marine power have been carried out already at the smaller European Marine Energy Centre in the Orkneys, Scotland.

Government predictions have suggested that Britain could benefit from three gigawatts of marine power by 2020 — enough to power three towns. Five megawatts (enough to power about 1,000 homes) is expected to be generated annually from 2010, and 60 megawatts from 2015.

However, the new funding is only a small step to securing the future of the sector. The cost of producing electricity from marine power is about 12p per kilowatt hour, much higher than from conventional fossil sources. The price is expected to fall in future.

Michael Hay, the marine energy spokesman for the British Wind Energy Association (BWEA), said that the industry still needed at least £500 million from the public and private sectors if the Government's

target is to be reached. This sum would meet the shortfall between the amount that utilities receive for power and the capital expenditure for the emerging technology.

Industry leaders point to the success of renewable industries elsewhere, such as the Danish wind power sector, which has benefited from investment over several decades. They say that the benefit from this domestic, predictable and regular source of renewable power could be huge.

"If you just see it as a power production issue, then there are cheaper ways to make power," Mr Hay said, "but the bigger picture is the creation of jobs and a new industry and the development of a significant engineering base using the UK's already available oil and gas offshore expertise. It's a matter of political ambition."

Pelamis, a Scottish wave power company, has already sold three of its devices to Enersis, the Portuguese energy company, in the first phase of the world's first commercial wave farm, which is about to start off Portugal's northern coast. Developers are attracted to Portugal by incentives of €0.23 (16p) per kilowatt hour that Portuguese utilities have been obliged to pay for renewable energy — far more than most other European tariffs for clean energy.

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