



## Government Offshore Plan Threatens East Coast

Ireland's beautiful east coast and its marine wildlife are under threat as a result of Government endorsement of developers' plans to construct over 800 offshore wind turbines which would be clearly visible from the coasts of counties Louth, Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford.

These plans, advanced during the Celtic Tiger Era, were endorsed in a draft **Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan** (OREDP) published by Green Party Minister for Energy, Eamon Ryan, in 2010. This Plan was adopted virtually unchanged by the Fine Gael/Labour coalition in February 2014. It paves the way for Ireland's unspoilt coastline to be industrialised by private developers, who availed of outdated legislation (**Foreshore Act, 1933**) to advance proposals for some of the largest offshore wind farms in the world close to our East Coast.

### Deficiencies in OREDP

The **Strategic Environmental Assessment** (SEA) accompanying the OREDP concluded that, with regard to the East coast, *"it would be possible to achieve 4,500 MW from offshore wind (aprox. 900 turbines) without likely significant adverse effect on the environment"*. This conclusion is entirely unjustified because of the very significant *"data, knowledge and information gaps"* acknowledged by the authors to be a *"key limitation of the assessment which has been undertaken"*.

The absence of proper visual impact assessment of hundreds of turbines on designated East Coast landscapes and the absence of reliable data on the cumulative impact of such large scale industrial development on marine wildlife are major data gaps acknowledged by the authors. These issues are amongst the most contentious aspects of offshore wind development and any environmental assessment which does not deal with them comprehensively is dangerously deficient.

**The OREDP, based on a deficient SEA, is deeply flawed.** It is a clear example of retrospective planning and seems specifically designed to support a small group of vested interests. Questions must be asked in relation to the fact that the 4,500MW of offshore wind it endorses neatly encompasses all the development permitted and progressed close to the east coast during the Celtic Tiger era with no Renewable Energy Development Plan and no SEA, contrary to EU legislation.

### Speculation & Inadequate Regulation

Between 2002 and 2008, private developers availed of outdated legislation (**Foreshore Act 1933**) to obtain foreshore leases for construction of huge offshore wind farms close to Ireland's east coast on the sole authority of the Minister for the Marine. There was no strategic plan for offshore wind development, no prior selection of suitable zones by government, no public tender, no restriction on size of development or proximity to shore, no statutory involvement of local County Councils and no public right of appeal against the Minister's decision. In these omissions, Ireland was seriously out of line with good international practice

Developers were given a free hand to select sites on "a first come first served" basis. Once a foreshore lease was awarded by the Minister it could be sold on at a price based on the size of the development permitted, netting massive profit for the original Irish promoters. A gold rush ensued with offshore wind developers staking claim to large tracts of near shore, shallow East Coast waters.

## Need for Reform

Coastal Concern Alliance are deeply concerned that inappropriately awarded foreshore leases and the subsequent Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan now officially form the foundations on which plans for our coastal zone are based. Lip service has been paid to reform. The reality is that the speculation of a handful of developers during the Celtic Tiger Era continues to be the major influence shaping the future of Ireland's East Coast.

As Ireland moves to put in place the country's first **Maritime Spatial Plan** (MSP) in line with EU legislation, the risk is that this new plan for the future of our coastal waters will further entrench the planning failures of the past. If this happens, then the Government will have permitted a handful of developers to irrevocably alter Ireland's East coast, an amenity currently enjoyed by thousands of citizens.

This situation must be urgently addressed particularly in light of emerging EU plans to connect the offshore wind farms off the East Coast to a **North Sea Grid** for direct export. Are the coasts of Louth, Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford to be industrialised to meet the energy needs of our EU neighbours who are moving to protect their own coastlines against the adverse effects of offshore wind development? For example, in the UK, a recent proposal for a 109 turbine offshore wind farm (Navitus Bay) 20km off Dorset was turned down (September 2015) by Climate Minister, Amber Rudd, on the basis of "*seascape, landscape and visual impact*" and "*visual impact onshore*".

Ireland is now at a crossroads. Its beautiful coastline is still relatively unspoilt. Our new elected representatives will carry a huge responsibility to correct the mistakes of the past. They must ensure that this essential part of our heritage is preserved and that any development in our coastal waters is environmentally and economically cost effective and proven to be in the national interest.