



France seeks to harness natural resources in whirl of wind farms

Companies are being invited to build thousands of wind turbines in an attempt to develop renewable energy sources, says **Martin Arnold**

The red windmill on the roof of the Moulin Rouge cabaret club is arguably one of Paris's most recognisable monuments – as quintessentially French as the Eiffel Tower or Arc de Triomphe.

But this iconic symbol of Paris nightlife, home to the cancan since 1889, is still only one of a few dozen windmills in France.

The scarcity of more modern successors to the Moulin Rouge underlines how slow the French have been to adopt wind power as a renewable energy source, despite their eager embrace of nuclear power and lack of domestic fossil fuel resources.

All this looks set to change as France is planning a huge push for its wind power sector by inviting bids from companies to build thousands of wind turbines around France during the next seven years.

It is counting on wind power to help it meet European Union objectives to increase the proportion of its overall power consumption from renewable sources from 15.5 per cent in 2001 to 22 per cent by 2010.

Hydroelectric power already provides about 15 per cent of France's electricity but this has little capacity for expansion, so the remaining increase must come from wind power, which accounts for less than 0.5 per cent of electricity generated.

One company keen to capitalise on this whirlwind of activity is French oil group Total, which opened its first wind farm near Dunkirk this month.

But Thierry Desmarest, Total's chief executive, says the French government needs to increase its financial support for wind power if France is to catch up with other European countries.

France is lagging well behind Germany, which generates almost half the world's installed wind power capacity of 30,000MW. Spain is second with capacity of more than 5,000MW, while

Denmark is third with 3,000MW.

Nicole Fontaine, French industry minister, has set a target of increasing France's wind power capacity from 250MW to about 10,000MW by 2010. Mr Desmarest says this is "very ambitious but not impossible".

However, he says the government-subsidised prices for wind power should be maintained, and even increased, until technological advances bring the cost of wind power down to self-sustainable levels – not expected for at least another 10 years.

Electricité de France, the state-owned power utility, pays the equivalent of 6.5 cents per kilowatt hour for wind power, or roughly double the price paid for electricity from oil-fired or nuclear power stations.

Mr Desmarest says even higher subsidies are needed to fund the cost of installing off-shore wind farms in the English Channel, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, which he claims are the best way to avoid protests from local communities about the impact of wind farms on their landscapes.

He says: "It is indispensable to the balance of wind power projects that preferential purchasing conditions for the electricity produced are maintained, even developed further, if you consider the extra cost of building some off-shore projects."

Total is using the Dunkirk wind farm as a pilot project to test a variety of the latest wind turbine models, some more than 100m tall, and

gain experience as it prepares to bid for much larger projects in the forthcoming wind power licensing round in France.

France's biggest listed company is also planning a bid in the UK, which in July invited offers for new off-shore wind farms aimed at increasing its total wind power capacity from about 500MW to 8,000MW by 2010.

But, having ignored wind power in preference for solar power for the past 20 years, Total will face stiff competition from rival European oil companies BP and Shell, which have devoted more resources and time to developing their wind power operations.

While political winds may be blowing in its favour, wind power still has many detractors, particularly those concerned with its impact on the environment.

The potential pitfalls of wind power were underlined in the summer when the recently elected Belgian government cancelled Total's proposal to build an off-shore wind farm near Zeebrugge, generating about 100MW, citing environmental concerns.

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