

# Ireland needs ambition to become global leader in renewable energy

**OPINION:** IRELAND'S WIND resources are among the best in the world. As other countries struggle to meet their 2020 climate change targets, our sights should be set way higher than theirs. We have the resources to be a global leader in renewable energy, writes **MICHAEL McBENNETT**

Our wind blows stronger and for longer than in most other countries. There is 3,500 MW of onshore wind either already developed or in planning. Offshore wind could provide a further 7,100 MW. We have wave and tidal resources which will play an important role for us in the future. Between them, these resources would give us well over the Government target of 40 per cent of our energy coming from renewable sources.

Ireland already has a well developed onshore wind industry. Offshore wind is emerging as a new opportunity. The attraction is simple. Developing at sea makes larger wind farms possible. More constant winds and greater wind speeds offer greater reliability of electricity generation. The Arklow Bank wind farm is planned to have a generation potential of 750 MW, making it the third largest power generator in the State.

We are not used to the idea that this nation could be energy rich. Ireland is now the fourth least secure country in the EU in energy supply. Ireland holds about 11 days' supply of gas for generating purposes. Gas is the main fuel used in our conventional power plants.

In the recent cold snap we saw record energy demand as the country tried to keep warm. Meanwhile, another energy skirmish was developing, between Russia and Belarus, over oil – once more threatening energy supplies in the EU. Supplies of North Sea gas were also restricted to some.

It is now nearly an annual event that Russia and one of its neighbours has a row over oil or gas, as EU countries wonder when the lights will go out. Ireland should look nervously too at the North Sea, where oil and gas has peaked and is in decline.

As we sit helpless to influence such foreign events, the wind blows around the Irish coast, its energy potential untapped. Development of a largely indigenous fuel supply such as offshore wind grants us energy independence. In an era where oil and gas will continue to decline in supply and increase in price, this should be a national priority. Improving our energy security is an even more important motive for developing renewables than meeting climate change targets.

Renewable energies such as offshore wind are a hedge against oil and gas prices. As we move out of recession in the next two years, there is no reason to believe oil and gas prices will not return to 2008 levels. future offshore wind energy prices will be competitive.

The UK, Denmark and Germany are rapidly developing offshore capability. The sector will see an investment of €300 billion in the next 15 years to exploit wind energy in Europe. These developments point the way on what Ireland can do, and offer us an economic opportunity. A cost-benefit analysis of the offshore sector in Ireland from economic consultants Indecon in 2008 shows a net economic benefit to Ireland of up to €1.8 billion from developing 1,000 MW of wind energy in Irish waters. This includes reduction of fuel bills, carbon avoidance and employment opportunities.

Last week the UK announced the development of a further 32 GW of offshore wind projects in their waters in the next 10 years. Irish firms will be involved in building over half of these windfarms. The scale of the investment involved will change the energy landscape in Europe forever.

Ireland can do this too. Our offshore wind resources can supply this island and other markets. Companies such as Harland Wolff in Belfast have moved to take advantage of the UK windfarm opportunities.

Ireland is not yet seen as a serious player by the leading European wind developers. They cannot understand the failure to develop projects. Barriers in terms of grid connection, planning consent and pricing continue to hamper development here. It takes half as long to build an offshore wind farm in Scotland or Denmark as it does here. These issues must be addressed.

The nine-nation protocol to examine the construction of a North Seas Energy Grid (including the Irish Sea) is the first tangible step in creating an EU energy market. This will move us to being an important player in a single European energy market. We must plan for this and ensure that Ireland takes full advantage of the economic opportunity it brings, for which our children will be grateful.

Michael McBennett is chairman of the National Offshore Wind Association