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Rising energy costs challenge remote Monhegan, Matinicus

[Bill Trotter](#)

Editor's Note: This is the second part of the Bangor Daily News' three-part series on energy issues on Maine's offshore islands. Today's story covers the special problems faced by residents of the more distant Monhegan and Matinicus islands.

Of all the residential power users in the state of Maine, the ones that pay the highest rates may be the ones that live farthest from land.

Monhegan and Matinicus are two of Maine's seven offshore island communities that have their own electric cooperatives, which charge higher rates than private retail power companies that serve the rest of the state. Because the island co-ops own and maintain their own distribution systems and have relatively few users to help cover the infrastructure costs, their members typically pay \$150 for their monthly electric bills, approximately twice what residential users on the mainland pay, according to island officials.

Two other offshore island groups have populations large enough that they could buy and use large, commercial-scale wind turbines for generating power. The Fox Islands Electric Cooperative, which serves Vinalhaven and North Haven in Penobscot Bay, is considering acquiring two or three large turbines, while the Swan's Island Electric Cooperative, which serves Swan's Island and neighboring Frenchboro, is thinking about acquiring one or two.

Each co-op would use the turbines to generate electricity for their members, and during part of the year, could sell their excess electricity into the regional power grid by underwater power cables that connect them to the mainland — a move that officials say could stabilize and perhaps even reduce the islanders' monthly power bills.

Monhegan and Matinicus, even though they also tend to be windy places, don't have this option, however. They have relatively small populations, which would make it more difficult for the islands to shell out between \$2 million and \$3 million for a large turbine. Their distances from shore — Monhegan is about 10 miles out to sea and Matinicus more than 20 — is another obstacle. The cost of laying underwater cable, which can be hundreds of thousands of dollars for even a few miles, is prohibitively expensive for these small communities, each with fewer than 100 year-round residents. Because they don't have cable connections to the mainland, Matinicus and Monhegan generate their power the same way they have for decades. They use diesel fuel, the cost of which has dramatically increased, especially in the past year.

This is why electricity bills on these islands tend to be about a third higher than on other islands with electric co-ops that import power by underwater cables. A year ago, the average cost of diesel in the

Bangor area was less than \$3 a gallon, but now it is around \$4.50 a gallon, according to AAA. In July, it was nearly \$5 a gallon.

“They’re getting creamed out there,” George Baker, a Harvard Business School professor and seasonal Frenchboro resident, said recently. Baker, who is on sabbatical from Harvard this year, is assisting the Fox Islands and Swan’s Island co-ops and the Rockland-based Island Institute by researching the economic feasibility and possible funding mechanisms for acquiring and erecting large wind turbines.

Baker said that underwater cables are important, not just because they would allow co-ops to sell their excess wind-generated power but because they would give the co-ops an outlet for their electricity when they are generating more than they can immediately use. Without cable connections into the grid, any entity that generates electricity has to figure out how to store it. This alternative, of somehow keeping that power on Monhegan and Matinicus, is not an easy or cost-effective option, according to Baker.

“That’s the problem for Monhegan and Matinicus,” he said. “You can’t store it anywhere.”

Monhegan

Katy Boegel, president of the Monhegan Plantation Power District, said recently that the most recent price she could recall the district paying for diesel fuel was \$4.65 a gallon. She said she wasn’t sure what the average island monthly power bill was, but estimated that at her house, where she frequently uses a computer and her children play video games, her monthly power bill is “probably a couple hundred dollars a month.” She also owns and runs a local general store, she said, where her monthly power bill is closer to \$900.

“Everyone is sitting up and paying attention,” Boegel said of the island’s electricity costs. “We’ve got to do something. We can’t keep going like this.”

Monhegan’s wintertime population is about 70 residents and grows to between 400 to 500 in the summer, including hotel guests and weekly renters, according to Boegel. The power district on the island, which is approximately 11 miles from the nearest point on the main-land, has about 100 customer accounts, she said.

Monhegan is looking into the possibility of tapping into wind power, Boegel said, and has been assisted by four Tufts University graduate school students who completed a research project on the issue this past spring. Because Monhegan lacks a power cable connection to the mainland, she said, the question of how to store wind-generated electricity on the island would have to be solved before any such project could go forward. A battery system may be possible, but it likely would be expensive — possibly too much so, she said.

According to Boegel, some residents over the years have tried using small wind turbines to power their homes but the turbines were noisy and the technology wasn’t very good. The amount of power they generated was negligible, she said, and the turbines were damaged frequently in high winds.

The island at one point considered a solar array, she said, but it doesn’t have enough available land for a facility that would be big enough to make the effort worthwhile. Some residents have their own solar panels, but they tend to work best in summer when the weather is good and to perform isolated tasks such as heating hot water rather than powering a whole house. Some seasonal residents, she said, have houses without any electricity at all.

Boegel said tidal power technology, which is not as advanced or common as that of wind power, is not likely to be an option the island would pursue in the near future. Whatever technology the island opts for needs to be commonplace enough that the local power district can address whatever technical issues may arise on its own, rather than depending on a specialist coming out from the mainland, she said.

“We need to have technology out here that [local] people can service,” Boegel said.

Matinicus

On even more remote Matinicus, residents looked into the possibility of wind power during the 1970s energy crisis, according to resident Bill Hoadley. At that time, probably because technology was limited then, they concluded there was not enough wind in the summer and too much wind in the winter for turbines to be feasible, he said recently.

So the island stuck with diesel generators, and as a result, Hoadley’s monthly electricity bill and that of many other Matinicus residents is about \$200 a month. At the end of June the local power company, where Hoadley works as the clerk and treasurer, paid \$21,000 for 5,000 gallons of diesel fuel, he said.

“It just about cleaned our checking account out,” he said. “We usually buy more.”

The utility, which serves nearly all of the island’s 100 or so homes, usually gets about three or four fuel deliveries a year. How much fuel it can order is affected by whether everyone has paid his bill, which is not always the case. One seasonal resident owes the company more than \$6,000, he said.

“Everyone’s up in arms about the price of fuel,” Hoadley said. “[But] we don’t really have too much choice.”

Matinicus, which is a 23-mile ferry ride from Rockland, has about 200 residents in the summer but only about 20 people who live on the island year-round, according to Hoadley. Some of them have decided to reconstitute the local Power Advisory Board, which has been defunct for the past several years, to look into options for mitigating their energy costs, he said, but when it will meet has not been decided. One resident has erected a small, private wind turbine at his home, Hoadley said, but otherwise little is being done.

“I’ve heard talk about it, but no one’s doing anything,” he said of residents generating their own power. “[Diesel fuel] prices may keep going up.”

The size of Matinicus, only 740 acres, could rule out the possibility of the island installing large turbines, which have been known to generate complaints from people who live close enough to hear the blades spinning through the air, according to Hoadley. The multimillion-dollar cost of large, commercial-scale turbines is another obstacle, he said.

“I’m very much allergic to noise,” Hoadley said, “and we don’t have that kind of money.”

The third and final installment of this series on Maine’s offshore islands’ energy issues will look at other initiatives and concerns on Isle au Haut, Islesboro and Cranberry Isles, and at a Vinalhaven lodging business.

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