

## HIE Press Release

Future ownership of Cairngorm estate under review

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The question of who should own one of Scotland's wildest, most environmentally sensitive areas of land - including the mountain peak of Cairn Gorm - is to be examined in detail by the present owners.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) has appointed land management specialists Bidwells to determine the full range of potential ownership options for the Cairngorm estate and assess their respective advantages and disadvantages.

Bidwells' report is expected to be completed by the end of 2005 and will then be considered by the enterprise network's board.

The 1,418-hectare estate was earmarked for winter sports development and transferred to HIE's predecessor body, the Highlands and Islands Development Board in 1971 by the then-Scottish Office.

Around a third of the estate is currently leased to CairnGorm Mountain Ltd, operators of the ski area and mountain railway, which opened in 2002.

HIE's policy on its property and land holdings is not to remain a long-term landlord, but to dispose of properties it no longer needs, recycling the money it raises into new development projects.

With no further major developments planned at Cairngorm, HIE has decided the time is right to identify potential 'exit routes' from its continuing ownership of the estate.

Potential disposal of the estate presents a unique set of challenges. HIE has told Bidwells it wants to preserve commercial activity on the hill, which is so important to the local economy, as well as taking account of conservation responsibilities, including EU designations.

In addition, a number of obligations to protect the environment from the impact of non-skiing visitors are enshrined in a legally-binding agreement between HIE, Scottish Natural Heritage, The Highland Council and CairnGorm Mountain Ltd.

Douglas MacDiarmid, HIE's director of global connections, said: "We're determined to do all we can to identify a strategy for the future ownership of the estate to balance the important role of the railway and ski slopes in underpinning tourism in the area with the need to manage public access and care properly for this sensitive environment.

"That's clearly a very challenging task and the research from Bidwells will be vital in ensuring we take all the relevant factors into consideration and reach the correct decision."

Peter Graham, senior partner in Bidwells' Inverness office, said: "The Cairngorm estate is unique in Scotland in terms of its importance both to the local community and economy and to the environment.

"HIE and its predecessors have for more than 30 years struck a successful balance between these competing pressures, and it is vital that whatever form the future ownership and management of the Cairngorms takes, this balance and the benefits for Scotland that flow from it must be preserved.

"Bidwells is delighted to be able to contribute its many years of collective experience and knowledge to helping HIE devise the best solution."

As well as consulting statutory bodies, Bidwells will seek views from a range of independent groups such as local community councils and business organisations, as well as neighbouring landowners and others with an interest in the future ownership of the estate.