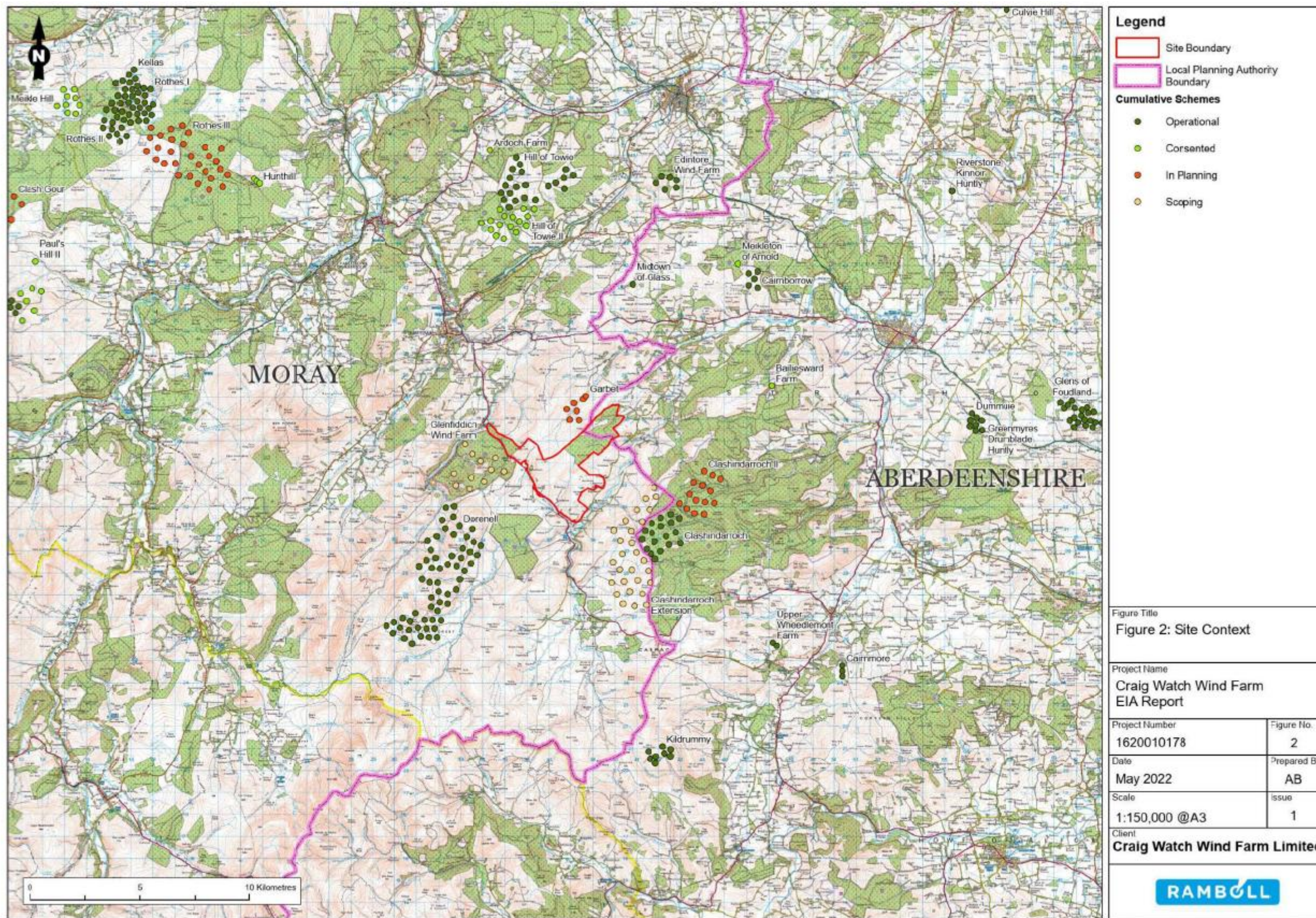


CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED: CRAIG WATCH WIND FARM

Consultation from Scottish Government Energy Consents & Deployment Unit

REFERENCE: 2022/0217/PAC (ECU00002177)
APPLICANT: Craig Watch wind farm Ltd (Statkraft)
DATE CONSULTED: 20 June 2022
RECOMMENDATION: No objection
CASE OFFICER: Stephanie Wade, Planning Officer



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Coordinate System: British National Grid. Projection: Transverse Mercator. Datum: OSGB 1936.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the committee decision and subsequent consultation response to the Scottish Government Energy Consents & Deployment Unit (ECDU) on an application submitted under Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 for a proposed wind farm located to the north east of the Cairngorms National Park. The Scottish Government are the determining Authority for this application as the output is more than 50 MW. The application is accompanied by an Environmental Report (ER), which presents the findings of the applicant's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).
2. The planning issues to be considered are confined to the effects of the proposed wind farm on the landscape character and Special Landscape Qualities (SLQs) of the National Park. All other matters, such as ecology, noise, general amenity, etc, are assessed by the decision maker (Scottish Ministers) with advice from statutory consultees.
3. Under the current working agreement on roles in landscape casework between NatureScot and the Park Authority, NatureScot lead on the provision of advice on the effects on the SLQs caused by proposals outwith the Cairngorms National Park. Their advice has been used to inform this report.

SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

4. The majority of the proposed wind farm would be located in the 'limb' of the red line boundary pointing to the north east that is mapped as forestry, approximately 8 km south east of Dufftown, indicated in the applicant's ER figure 2 on page 2 of this report. As also shown in the figure, in the surrounding area there are numerous other existing and consented wind farms, plus several proposed wind farms in the planning system.
5. The proposed development would comprise 11 turbines with a maximum height of 200m to the tip of the blade in an upright position, approximately 8km of new permanent access tracks and upgrading of approximately 2km of existing track, as well as other infrastructure and works (such as substation, underground cabling, borrow pits, etc). It is expected that the proposed wind farm would have an estimated total installed capacity in excess of 50MW, although no figure has been provided by the applicant.
6. The nearest turbine would be approximately 11 km to the northeast of the Cairngorm National Park boundary, with the other turbines, tracks and associated infrastructure located beyond this distance. The access track would be located closer than the nearest proposed turbine.
7. Theoretical visibility of the proposed wind farm from within the National Park is shown by the applicant's ER figure 5.4b (**Appendix I**). When considering the cumulative visual effects, the applicant's figure 5.7b (**Appendix II**) demonstrates that visibility of the proposed wind farm would be limited from within the National Park. Much of where it would be seen from is already influenced by visibility of several other existing and consented wind farms. However, there is an area (shown in blue) within the National

Park where it would introduce visibility of a wind farm where currently there is none, on the Cromdale Hills.

8. Visualisations from two viewpoints were provided in the applicant's ER to demonstrate the predicted level of visibility that would be had from within/on the boundary of the National Park:
 - a) VP8 at Little Geal Carn, approximately 18km southwest of the closest turbine
 - b) VP17 in the Cromdale Hills, approximately 24km west of the closest turbine
9. **Committee members should familiarise themselves with the above visualisations online before the meeting.** The visualisations associated with each view point are available to the public by searching the application documents on the ECDU website:
<https://www.energyconsents.scot/ApplicationDetails.aspx?cr=ECU00002177> for the relevant figures within:
 - a) EIAR_Volume_3b_Visualisations_Part 2
 - b) EIAR_Volume_3b_Visualisations_Part 4
 - c) EIAR_Volume_3b_Visualisations_Part 5

RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

10. In December 2020, Cairngorms National Park Authority responded to a scoping consultation from ECDU for the current application.

PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

11. The proposed development is located wholly outwith the National Park, therefore the Cairngorms National Park Local Development Plan policies do not apply. However, an assessment of the proposal must have regard to Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) and the National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP).

National Policy

12. **Scottish Planning Policy [SPP]** (revised December 2020) sets out national planning policies that reflect Scottish Ministers priorities for the development and use of land, as well as for operation of the planning system. The content of SPP is a material consideration in planning decisions that carries significant weight.
13. Policy relating specifically to National Parks and development management can be found in paragraphs 84 and 85 of SPP. The paragraphs re-state the four aims of the National Parks as set out in the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000, as well as the need to pursue these collectively. SPP highlights that if there is a conflict between the first aim (conserving and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage of the area) and any of the others, then greater weight must be given to the first aim. Planning decisions are expected to reflect this weighting and be consistent with the four aims.

14. Paragraph 85 of SPP also clarifies that the aims and requirements of paragraphs 84 and 85 apply to development outwith a National Park that affects the Park.
15. Paragraph 212 of SPP states that “where development affects a National Park [...] it should only be permitted where:
 - a) the objectives of the designation and the overall integrity of the area will not be compromised; or
 - b) any significant adverse impacts on the qualities for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social, environmental, or economic benefits of national importance”.

Strategic Policy

16. The **Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan [NPPP] 2022-2027** is required under section 11 of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. It is the management plan for the Cairngorms National Park approved by Scottish Ministers. The NPPP sets out how all those with a responsibility for the National Park will coordinate their work to tackle the most important issues. There is a duty for decision makers to have regard to the NPPP, a requirement set out in Section 14 of the Act. As such, the NPPP is a material consideration in planning decisions.
17. The NPPP identifies that the landscapes of the National Park are valued by many and underpin the area’s economy. It contains policies to safeguard landscape interests. Of relevance to wind farm development proposals are policies A4 and C2.a.
18. Policy A4 seeks to conserve and enhance the Special Landscape Qualities [SLQs]. Policy C2.a seeks to support development of a low carbon economy and increase renewable energy generation where this is compatible with conserving the SLQs. In relation to wind farm development, the policy states that “Large-scale wind turbines are not compatible with the landscape character or special landscape qualities of the National Park. They are inappropriate within the National Park or in areas outside the National Park where they adversely affect its landscape character or special landscape qualities.”.

CONSULTATIONS

NatureScot advice

19. In accordance with the NatureScot/CNPA casework agreement, NatureScot have provided CNPA with advice in relation to the effects on the National Park, of the proposed wind farm both alone and cumulatively with other existing and consented wind farms in the surrounding area.
20. NatureScot do not advise that there would be effects on the landscape character of the National Park.
21. In relation to the SLQs, NatureScot advise that there would be a significant adverse effect on one SLQ, ‘dark skies’, caused by aviation lighting of the proposed wind farm,

both alone and in combination with the at appeal stage Garbet wind farm and the scoping stage Glenfiddich wind farm.

22. NatureScot advice is that currently there are no operational or consented wind farms in the study area requiring such level of lighting. The sparsely populated area is characterised by low levels of artificial light at night and the Cairngorms Dark Sky Park lies to the south-west of the proposal. NatureScot advise that the proposal would introduce night-time lighting into an area that is highly valued and visited for its dark skies. Whilst proposed measures to control the intensity and direction of lighting has been explored, NatureScot advise that significant effects on the dark skies SLQ would remain.
23. NatureScot consider that the significance of the effects on the SLQ are however not of a degree that it would damage the unity or soundness of the National Park and consequently would not affect its integrity.

APPRAISAL

24. As context, reference is made to the September 2022 decision notice for now consented Garbet wind farm, which is located adjacent to the proposed Craig Watch wind farm and would have a similar pattern of lighting visibility. The Reporter for the Garbet appeal “accepted that the visual impact would not be significant”, and that “there would be no significant effect on the Cairngorms National Park due to the distance from the turbines and there would be no visibility of the proposed development from all three dark sky discovery sites” (paragraphs 38 and 39 of the decision notice).
25. While each application should be judged on its own merits, this provides useful context for consideration of lighting effects that would be caused by the Craig Watch proposal.
26. It is considered that effects in the Cromdale and Ladder hills caused by the lighting of Craig Watch would be reduced during periods of good visibility. This is because the intensity of the lighting would be reduced by the operator during periods of good weather as part of proposed mitigation measures, and because the intensity and spread of effects from lighting diminishes with distance. For example, 200 candela lights (which is the level proposed to be used during good visibility conditions) are comparable to seeing car brake lights at 10km during good visibility¹. The affected areas are at a significantly greater distance than this (approximately 24 and 15km respectively), further reducing the effects.
27. It is also considered that the effects during periods of poor visibility would be negated by the poor visibility preventing lighting from extending into the National Park.
28. There would be no visibility at any time of the Craig Watch turbine lighting at the three promoted viewing points within the Dark Skies Park (Blairfindy Moor, Field of Hope, The Carrachs).

¹ Evidence by Professor Philip Best, Institute for Astronomy, University of Edinburgh at the Rothes III wind farm public local inquiry in 2020

29. The policies of the NPPP and SPP set out how proposals outwith the boundary of the National Park should be considered in terms of effects on the National Park.
30. Policy C2.a of the NPPP sets out a test for considering effects on the landscapes of the National Park, in that large scale wind turbines are inappropriate outside the National Park where they 'significantly adversely affect its landscape character or special landscape qualities'. If a proposal fails policy C2.a, it will also conflict with policy A4, which seeks to conserve and enhance the SLQs.
31. Paragraph 212 of SPP sets out that "development that affects a National Park [...] should only be permitted where:
 - a) the objectives of designation and the overall integrity of the area will not be compromised; or
 - b) any significant adverse effects on the qualities for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social, environmental, or economic benefits of national importance."
32. In the policy context of the NPPP and SPP, consideration is required of the effects of the proposed development, on landscape character and the SLQs, both alone and cumulatively with other wind farms in the surrounding area.
33. There are several existing and consented wind farms in the area surrounding the proposed wind farm, as shown on page 2 of this report. Adding the proposed Craig Watch wind farm to the baseline would not significantly add to the existing level of effects, either alone or in combination with other existing or consented wind farms.
34. Only one SLQ is affected, with the effects being limited due to distance. The nature and significance of the effects from the proposed wind farm are such that the proposal is therefore considered to comply with National Park Partnership Plan policy C2.a.
35. There is some tension with policy A4, as by affecting one SLQ, the proposal would not technically conserve or enhance the SLQs of the National Park. However, the affected areas are at some distance from the proposed wind farm. This reduces the level of effects during good visibility and negates them during poor visibility. Therefore, the proposal is not considered to breach policy A4.
36. When considering the nature and significance of the effects, the proposal would not compromise the integrity or objectives of the National Park. The proposal is therefore also considered to be in accordance with Scottish Planning Policy paragraph 212.
37. For these reasons, it is considered that CNPA should **not** object to the proposed wind farm development.

RECOMMENDATION

That Members of the Committee confirm:

- That CNPA does not object to the application for the proposed Craig Watch wind farm.