
CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Title: UPGRADE OF ELECTRICITY TRANSMISSION LINE FROM BEAULY TO DENNY:

PRE-APPLICATION CONSULTATION ON THE PREFERRED ROUTE.

**Prepared by: NORMAN BROCKIE, PLANNING OFFICER
(Local Plan/Policy)**

Purpose

This aim of this report is to introduce the SSE (Scottish & Southern Energy) consultation on the preferred route for the new Beauly to Denny electricity transmission line. We will subsequently be consulted on the Scoping Report, for our opinion on what should be covered by the Environmental Statement; this in turn will be part of the final consultation, the Section 37 (Electricity Act 1989) Application. The two latter consultations come via the Scottish Executive.

Recommendations

The Committee supports the intention to request further information and dialogue from SSE, either regarding what mitigative measures can be applied to the proposed route as it travels through the Park, or investigating an alternative route (b4).

Executive Summary

The need to upgrade the Beauly to Denny transmission line is not in question, but the impacts will be considerable whichever route it finally takes through the Central Highlands; the (SSE) preferred route cuts through the SW corner of the CNP. A Stakeholder Group has been set up by SSE and the Scottish Executive, in which I participate, to ensure constant dialogue and feedback on issues as they arise.

The upgrading of this transmission line will cause a considerable adverse impact on the landscape of the Park, natural heritage, and on the Dalwhinnie and Laggan area communities. An alternative route should be considered (b4 on Diagram 1) which will completely avoid the National Park, NSA's and most designated sites; it would also be much less visible.

If the construction difficulties involved with this alternative route cannot be overcome, then we will require mitigative measures to lessen the impact of the pylons as they travel through the Park, particularly: where they pass over the hill from Strathmashie to Dalwhinnie; where they pass by Dalwhinnie; and where they cross over the Drumochter Pass.

Background

1. Scottish and Southern Energy are proposing to upgrade the existing Beauly to Denny transmission line, which effectively links the Highlands to the Central Belt. The main reason for upgrading from 132kv to 440kv is to allow the development of renewable energy schemes (e.g. wind farms) in the NW to meet national targets. The preferred line will follow 75% of the existing route; redundant equipment will then be dismantled and removed. The existing 25m high pylons will be replaced by 45/50m pylons.
2. The proposed section within the Park comes down towards Laggan from the Corrieyairack Pass (on the existing route) then cuts south to the A86 just below Strathmashie House and over the hills to Dalwhinnie and down the A9 via Drumochter (re-joining the existing route).
3. The purpose of this consultation is to ascertain opinion on SSE's preferred route, which passes through the Park as noted above. Diagram 1 shows a map of options which have been investigated by SSE, taking into account designated landscapes and sites in an 'environmentally-led' manner.

Issues for the Cairngorms National Park

4. The preferred route has several other options in the section from Fort Augustus to Errochty, see Diagram 1; this is however a superbly scenic area with many designated sites, and there is no easy option for a new route. The fact that the preferred route mostly follows the line of the existing pylons does swing in its favour, as new development on wild land/designated sites is minimised, and people may be accustomed to the pylons. Many of the other options would require considerable infrastructure & access development just to get near the sites, often disrupting 'wild land'. Option b4, for example, avoids almost all designated areas but mostly crosses through remote country.
5. The proposed route over the hill from Strathmashie to Dalwhinnie would have seriously adverse impacts on the landscape, crossing at a shallow gap on the hill/skyline at an elevation of 500m (see photo 1). A better option may be to follow the existing 'valley floor' route, which will also alleviate the problem in point 6. It may be possible, and relatively straightforward, to under-ground much of this section.
6. The village of Dalwhinnie is currently skirted by the existing pylon line, which does not cross the River Truim. The new pylon route appears to pass between the village and the head of Loch Erich; the impact this will have on the village will be considerable. The new 45/50m pylons can be spaced over 300metres apart, which may allow for careful spacing to minimise impact, but general proximity to housing may still be a serious problem; under-grounding of the cables may be the best option in this area.
7. The Drumochter Pass is probably the most important 'gateway' into the Park, and is also a combined SSSI/SAC/SPA; this route is already marred by the 25m pylons which currently follow the route of the A9, see photo 2. This impact will

be considerably worsened by 45/50m high pylons, dominating the narrow pass. The visual impact could best be dealt with by under-grounding but this may not be compatible with the designated status of the area.

8. The technicalities of under-grounding cables of this size are considerable, but by no means impossible; it is, however, much more expensive and disruptive environmentally. The end result could be a landscape free of pylons, which would be an ideal scenario. The reality is less positive, as rocky or boggy ground conditions make under-grounding unfeasible; the excavation itself would be the width of a dual-carriageway road, whose scar would take some time to heal. That said, the financial and environmental costs of under-grounding should not be an over-riding determining factor in an area as important as a National Park, and can be carried out in a way that safeguards the long-term natural heritage interests.
9. All of the above issues have already been put to SSE, and will be the subject of continued dialogue; some of the issues can only be fully addressed when more detailed design stages are reached.

Conclusions

10. There are many issues being raised by the routing of this development, issues which could be avoided if the line was re-routed (as b4 on Diagram 1); the argument against this will most likely be that most of the route is remote and will require considerable access infrastructure to be built to facilitate construction. The applicant may be reluctant to incur the costs associated with this rather than the 'preferred' (and cheaper) option, which itself will come at a high price to the landscape and communities of the National Park. The reasons for not choosing route b4 should be more fully justified by the applicant, with a financial comparison.
11. If the alternative route cannot be justified or implemented, then the preferred route must have its impacts lessened by re-routing, under-grounding or other mitigative measures. More detail is required on exact positioning and construction techniques before this issue can be properly assessed, particularly with effect to its proximity to Dalwhinnie and the route it takes over Strathmashie Hill (or reverts to the existing valley-floor route). The impact on the Pass of Drumochter will cause considerable concern; under-grounding may not be possible as this is a designated site, but further details/discussion are required to resolve all of these issues.

Norman Brockie; 12th March 2004.

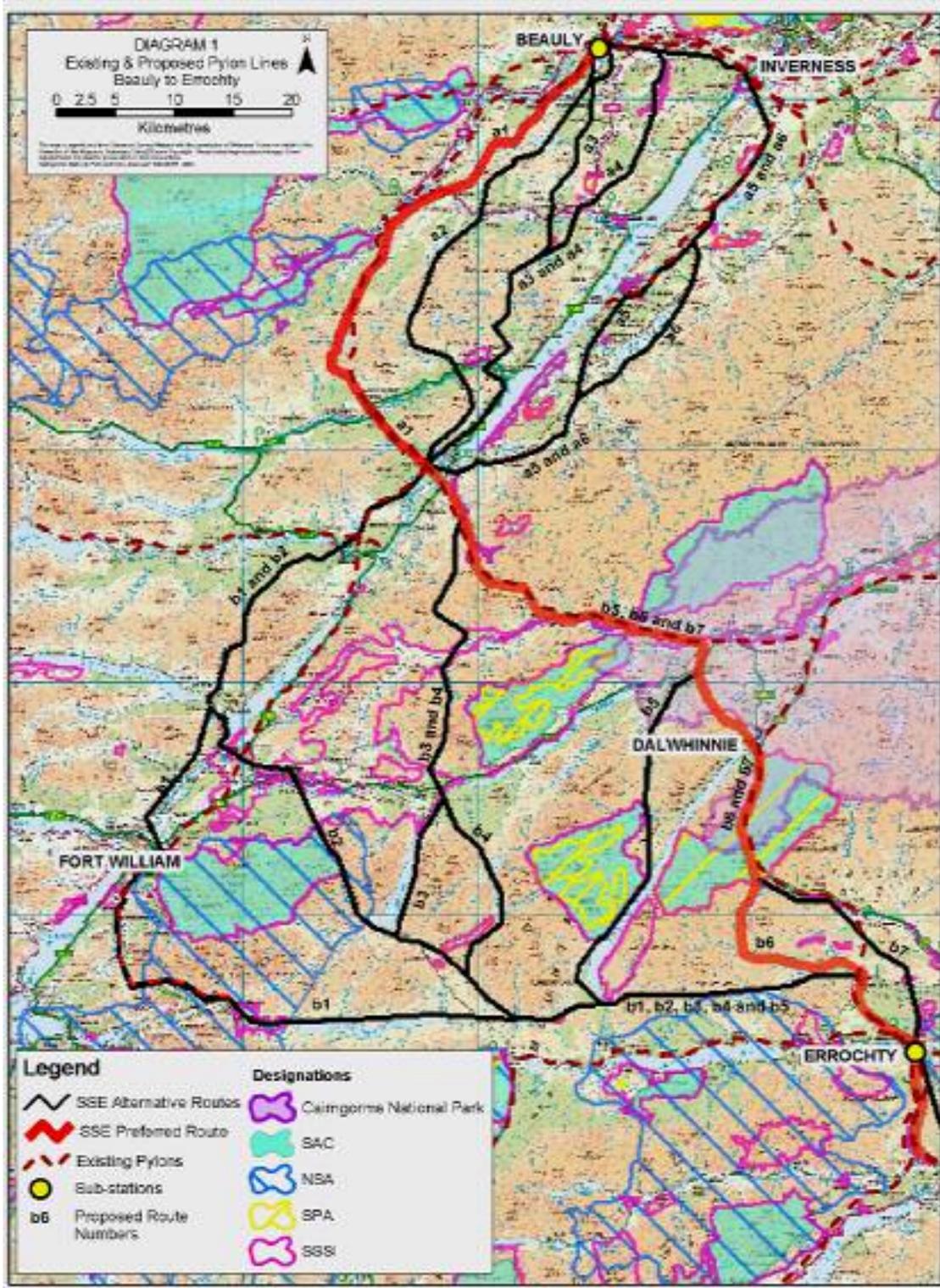


Diagram 1: Map of the proposed route.

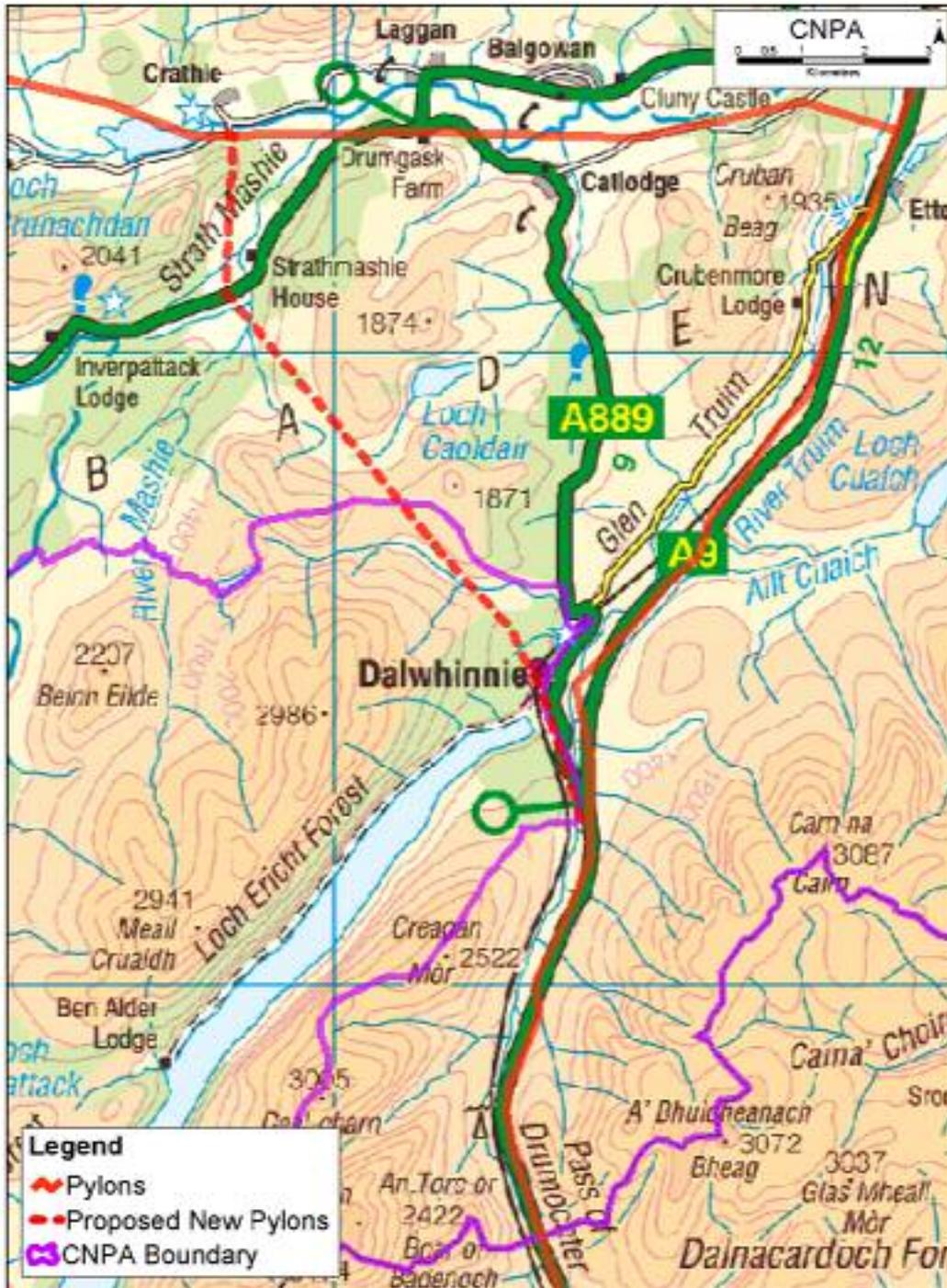


Diagram 2: detail plan of preferred route via Strathmashie and Dalwhinnie.

Key: dashed red line = preferred route
 solid red line = existing route

The preferred route effectively cuts the length of the existing route by approx. 50%, but comes over the hill and passes through the Dalwhinnie settlement.



Photo 1: Dalwhinnie from the A9 (Distillery on far right); the preferred pylon route comes over the hill somewhere to the left.



Photo 2: Existing pylons at Drumochter Pass, one of the principal gateways into the Park; these pylons will almost double in height.



impacts on wildlife



impacts on the landscape.