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# CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

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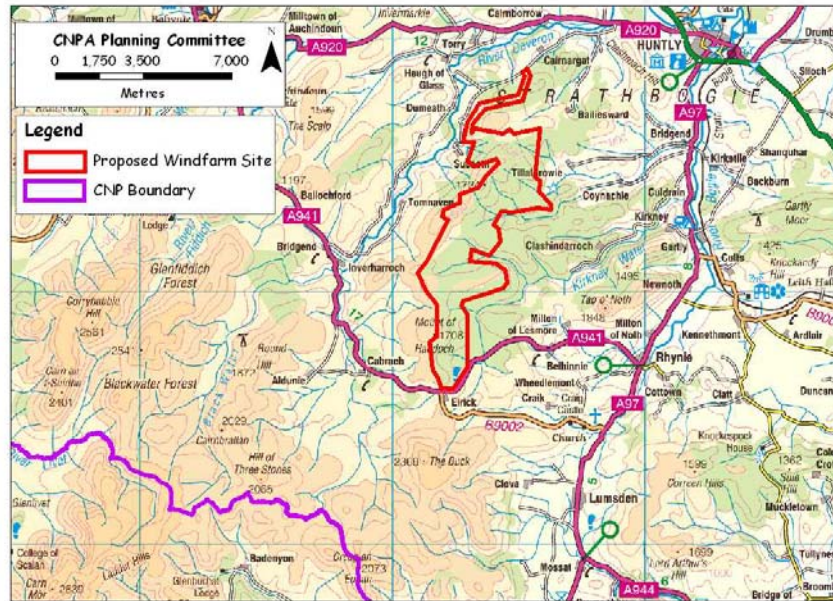
**Title: CONSULTATION REPORT ON PLANNING APPLICATION TO SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE UNDER SECTION 36 ELECTRICITY ACT 1989**

**Prepared by: ANDREW TAIT, PLANNING OFFICER (DEVELOPMENT CONTROL)**

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**DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED: FORMATION OF WINDFARM COMPRISING 40 TURBINES AND ASSOCIATED INFRASTRUCTURE INCLUDING PERMANENT MONITORING MAST, CLASHINDARROCH FOREST, NEAR HUNTLY, ABERDEENSHIRE**

**APPLICANT: AMEC PROJECT INVESTMENTS LTD**



**Fig 1 Location plan**

## SITE DESCRIPTION AND PROPOSAL

1. This application was originally submitted to the Scottish Executive in the summer of 2003 before the Park's planning powers went live. However, officers did write a short response to the SE raising concern about the potential landscape impacts of the proposal from the Park's perspective. Particular concern was raised that no viewpoints had been taken from within the Park as part of the landscape assessment.
2. The application mentioned above was for a total of 47 wind turbines with a tower height of 67 metres and a rotor blade diameter of 66 metres. The maximum height to the blade tip being 100 metres.
3. Because of comments made by consultees and third parties the proposal currently before us has been amended down to a total of 40 turbines. It is understood that Moray Council are seeking the deletion of a further 3 turbines at the southern end of the site. The turbines now proposed have differing dimensions from those originally proposed with a 67 metre tower as before but with a blade rotor diameter of 80 metres resulting in a total blade tip height of 107 metres. The number of turbines is reduced as a result of the increased spacings required for the larger rotor blades. A range of associated infrastructure is also required including a revised access from Well Heads on the A920, site control building and concrete batching plant.
4. The site itself is an undulating plateau between 450 and 520 metres above sea level between Huntly and Cabrach. The turbines are dispersed in a north to south pattern for approximately 6 kilometres along a hill ridge which divides the River Deveron from the Tap o' Noth, River Bogie and A97. Turbines are also predominantly located to the east of the hill ridge. The proposal would involve the felling of some sections of a commercial forestry plantation.
5. The site is approximately 7 kilometres from the north eastern boundary of the Park where it runs along the Craig nan Eunan hill ridge.
6. This report has been written at very short notice due to the tight deadlines in terms of responding to the Scottish Executive. While this situation is not ideal it does allow the Park some input into a scheme that was proposed before the Park's planning powers were established. Comments must be with the Executive by 10 February.
7. Aberdeenshire Council has also consulted the Park on an amended access for the proposal from Wellheads on the A920. The original access to the site was to be at the A920 from Cairnford Bridge. However, this route was part of a site of the Craigs of Succoth Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Concern was raised about this by the Scottish Executive and the new route proposed by the applicant's avoids the SSSI. This part of the proposal is at the opposite side of the site to the Park's boundary and would not be visible from the Park.

## DEVELOPMENT PLAN CONTEXT

8. **National Planning Policy Guideline 6 Renewable Energy (2000)** considers that in support of the UK Governments commitment to renewable energy and its contribution, more renewable energy developments are required to meet UK international obligations. The Ministers wish to see the planning system play its full part in facilitating and guiding renewable energy developments and ensuring that development control decisions are taken efficiently, consistent with national and international climate change policy commitments and obligations and preventing the unnecessary sterilisation of renewable energy resources; while at the same time meeting the international and national statutory obligations to protect designated areas, species and habitats of natural heritage interest and the historic environment from inappropriate forms of development; and minimising the effects on local communities.
9. **National Planning Policy Guidance Note 14 Natural Heritage**, recognises that the most sensitive landscapes may have little or no capacity to accept new development. Some of Scotland's remoter mountain and coastal areas possess an elemental quality from which people derive psychological and spiritual benefits. Such areas are sensitive to any form of intrusive human activity and planning authorities should take great care to safeguard their wild land character. This care should extend to the assessment of proposals for development outwith these areas which might adversely affect their wild land character.
10. The presence of a protected species or habitat is a material consideration in the assessment of development proposals. Planning authorities should take particular care to avoid harm to species or habitats protected under the 1981 Act or European Directives, or identified as priorities in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.
11. The presence of a national heritage designation is an important material consideration. This does not mean that development is precluded by the presence of such a designation. Proposals require to be assessed for their effects on the interests which the designation is designed to protect.  
**Development which would affect a designated area of national importance should only be permitted where:**
  - **The objectives of the designation and the overall integrity of the area will not be compromised; or**
  - **Any significant adverse effects on the qualities for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social or economic benefits of national importance.**

12. **Planning Advice Note 45 Renewable Energy Technologies (2002)** provides more detailed advice on assessing applications for wind farms and provides particular advice in terms of assessing landscape impact. The document notes that Scotland has a range of landscapes some of which will more easily accommodate wind farms than others. The guidance notes that a cautious approach is necessary in relation to particular landscapes such as National Scenic Areas and Proposed National Parks and their wider settings. Here it may be difficult to accommodate wind turbines without detriment to natural heritage interests.
13. **NEST Policy 5 Renewable Energy** supports new renewable energy facilities when compatible with ecological, transportation, landscape and amenity considerations. Directs that further detailed assessment be provided within local plans.
14. **NEST Policy 19** provides that development will only be permitted where it can be demonstrated that any damaging impacts are considered acceptable overall, or that there is a public interest that outweighs the conservation interest.
15. **NEST Policy 26** Four tier policy provides guidance on the location of wind farm development within tiers of preference related to areas where there are no International, National, Local or other designations that may be affected by proposed development. The policy requires a sequential approach to site selection with presumption in favour of Tier 4 sites. The site lies within a Tier 3 area under NEST (see Policy INF/7 below).
16. **Local Plan Policy ENV 5 National Scenic Areas and Areas of Landscape Significance** Provides that development will not be permitted in National Scenic Areas or Areas of Landscape Significance where its scale, location or design will detract from the quality or character of the landscape. Where development is allowable it must comply with further policy and be of the highest standard of design.
17. **Policy ENV/23 Vehicle Hill Tracks** considers that proposals for vehicle hill tracks, and extensions to them must show that they can be integrated into the landscape and minimise detrimental impact such as soil erosion, on the environment including habitats and watercourses, or they will be refused.
18. **Local Plan Policy INF/1 Roads and Accesses** considers that proposals for new roads and access will be supported if they are designed to be safe for pedestrians, include no new private access directly from a road carrying more than 2,000 vehicles per day, and satisfactory arrangements are made for maintenance.

19. **Local Plan Policy INF/7 Renewable Energy Facilities-Wind Farms** considers that wind farms will be supported in principle if located in Tier 4 designations. If located in Tier 3 designations they should be supported where impact will be minimal and there are no suitable alternative sites in Tier 4 designations. In addition, proposals must meet Health and Safety Standards on noise and interference. The landscape impact must be acceptable, and land restoration and aftercare details agreed.
20. **Policy Gen/ 2 Layout, Siting and Design of New Development** Provides Guidance on layout siting and design of new development with particular interest in maintaining local character, important views, amenity and landscape value and character.
21. **Cairngorms National Park Authority Interim Planning Policy 1 Renewable Energy (Finalised Draft) includes Recommendation RE4: Wind Farm Developments** which considers that wind farm proposals beyond the boundary of the Park will be carefully assessed for their visual impact on the landscape and setting of the Park and their natural heritage impacts. The four aims of the Park should not be considered as stopping dead at the boundary either, but ideally their objectives should extend beyond the invisible line. Viewpoints should be taken from within the Park, at the earliest stages of a proposal, to assess and mitigate against visual impacts. Natural Heritage issues will also stretch across the boundary, such as bird foraging areas and river catchments and their hydrology.
22. The policy goes on to consider that the cumulative impact of windfarms outwith the Park should also be carefully considered and minimised.

## CONSULTATIONS

23. Given the strict time limits involved with determining this application it has not been possible to carry out consultations. However, in discussion with the Natural Resource Group it was agreed that the information provided is not adequate to assess the implications of the project in terms of landscape and visual impact.

## APPRAISAL

24. There are a range of detailed issues relating to this proposal, which will be considered by the Scottish Executive who are seeking the CNPA's views on the proposal and this appraisal is written upon the basis of the proposals effect upon the aims of the Park and the CNPA's own Interim Policy on Renewable Energy.

25. This report is relatively brief given the limited time that can be devoted to it because of the deadlines, but also because of a lack of information which makes the effects of the proposal, overall on the Park's aims difficult to assess.

### **Conserve and Enhance the Natural and Cultural Heritage of the Area**

26. In terms of natural heritage the key factor here is the potential landscape impact of the proposal. Natural heritage issues relating to the site are being dealt with by Scottish Natural Heritage who are responding to the proposal both in terms of the habitat at the site and in terms of species that use the site.
27. In landscape terms the ZVI (zone of visibility) identified for the study area was 25 kilometres. As a result of this a number of key viewpoints were chosen for the landscape/visual assessment of the scheme. The Park's initial letter to the applicant's back in 2003 raised concern that no viewpoints from within the National Park had been chosen by the study. It is recognised that the Park may not have existed at the time the original landscape assessment was being carried out. However, given our earlier letter it would have been thought reasonable to include some viewpoints of the farm from within the Park as part of the amended Environmental Statement. Only one viewpoint has been provided from within the Park this being from Dun Muir on the Ladder Hills this makes the proposal quite difficult to assess. However, the computer generated maps do give an impression of what parts of the Park the farm would be visible from within the 25 kilometre study area. As pointed out the site is around 7 kilometres from the Park boundary where it runs along the summit ridge of Craig nan Eunan. A total of 31 to 40 turbines may be visible from this viewpoint. A similar number of turbines would be likely to be visible from Geal Charn, Meikle Corr Riabach and the summit of Carn Mor in the Ladder Hills. The assessment also points out that 21 to 30 turbines may be visible from Morven. In addition, it is important to note that the Kildrummy windfarm 11 turbine proposals which the Park has been consulted upon and objected to on landscape grounds would be viewed in the same line of sight from the Ladder Hills and Morven as Clashindarroch resulting in a cumulative visual impact.
28. As pointed out there is only one visualisation within the National Park and the study area being drawn at 25 kilometres excludes some of the more popular higher mountain summits within the Park. Despite the study area being drawn at 25 kilometres this does not mean that the windfarm would not be visible at greater distances away. Because of the lack of visual assessment there is little actual analysis of the effects of the proposal upon the Park in terms of landscape impact.

29. The Environmental Statement recognises that the effects of the proposal on the Park were not assessed as part of the July 2003 Environmental Statement. The supplementary information provided points out that an assessment of the affects are provided in supplementary information (see extract at the back of this report). **“The magnitude of change would be slight to negligible in areas such as the Ladder Hills, with limited areas of moderate magnitude occurring within the upland moorland on the park boundary. Clashindarroch windfarm would be viewed as a distant feature in the landscape and in most cases, there would be no visibility. The visual effects would be minor /moderate overall and not significant. The type of effect would be temporary during construction and long term (reversible) during operation, as well as direct and neutral. Considering all of these factors the integrity and character of the Cairngorms National Park would not be significantly or adversely affected by the windfarm”**
30. The cumulative impact section of the report recognises that the Paul’s Hill windfarm at 26 kilometres from the site would be visible from the Ladder Hills viewpoint as would Clashindarroch itself if consented and Kildrummy if consented which is located 15 kilometres from this viewpoint. In the assessment table the statement recognises the importance of the National Park as being a high sensitivity receptor and that the magnitude of change would be slight which leads to a minor/moderate level of effect. Local authority landscape designations are treated in a similar way. However, any hierarchy of designated landscapes would lead me to the view that a landscape of national importance such as the Cairngorms is a more highly sensitive receptor of visual impact than a local authority landscape designation and planning policy recognises this. Because of this I would place greater weight on potential for visual impact than the applicant’s landscape assessment. While it is accepted in line with the landscape assessment document that the windfarm would generally not be visible from the glens and straths of the Park it would be visible from certain hill ridges and tops. In addition, because the study area is drawn tightly at a 25 kilometre radius, this excludes the higher upland areas of the Park from being part of the assessment. On another issue some of the visualisations in the Environmental Statement illustrate that views towards the Park would be significantly affected from outlying popular hills such as Tap o’ Noth in Aberdeenshire.
31. With regard to the revised access to the site which now avoids the Craigs of Succoth SSSI I would propose to make no comment as the access is at the opposite end of the site well away from the park boundary, cannot be seen from the Park and is therefore not considered to raise any particular issues in terms of the Parks interests.

### **Promote Sustainable Use of Natural Resources**

32. At a fundamental level the use of wind power is contributing to a reduction in green house gas emissions and can be described as a sustainable use of natural resources. It could be argued that it would be more sustainable if facilities of this scale are sited closer to the large centres of population where most of the power generated will be consumed. In tandem with this the view could be taken that smaller developments servicing local communities would be the most sustainable.
33. Given Government policy on the issue of wind farms it is, however, concluded that the proposal contributes towards this aim in the widest national sense. However, it is important to note that in carrying out its duties in relation to this aim the National Park Authority is seeking to promote a more sustainable use of natural resources through all the policy and individual planning decisions that it makes.

### **Promote Understanding and Enjoyment of the Area**

34. NPPG 6 on Renewable Energy states that renewable energy developments are not necessarily incompatible with tourism and recreation interests whilst stressing that it is unrealistic to expect such developments to have no effect at all.
35. Whilst visitors passing through the Park by car or rail might not have their enjoyment marred by passing glimpses of wind farms, it is considered that the same will not hold true for those walking on the main summits of the National Park. However, the contribution that the quieter, less frequented hills such as the Ladder Hills make to peoples enjoyment of the Park should also be recognised. Visitor Services and Recreation Group have previously identified the qualities that bring visitors to the Park and the impact that the introduction of industrial elements in the landscape might have upon their experience. This aspect again highlights that a line on a map cannot be taken as the boundary of influence with regard to enjoyment. There is no evidence that the proposal would not have a detrimental impact upon this aim. Therefore, the precautionary approach should be adopted.

### **Promote Sustainable Economic and Social Development of the Area**

36. The application provides some limited information regarding economic and social benefit and points out that meetings have been held with the local community seeking their comments on the management of a proposed community benefit fund. However, this only really becomes an issue if the scheme is found to be acceptable in planning terms. In terms of long term economic benefits over the 25 year life of the windfarm a total of 3 full-time jobs would be likely to be created in its



operation and maintenance. It is pointed out that the proposal will help to sustain the 20 jobs already associated with the forest management of the windfarm area and that the turbines would provide a guaranteed income stream for the Forestry Commission.

37. A range of surveys are quoted on public attitudes to windfarms. However, most of these studies are from the 1990s and are therefore not as relevant as more up to date surveys based upon the sheer numbers of windfarms consented/proposed and actually built in a particular area, none of the surveys is directly based in a National Park where responses from both local people and visitors would be likely to emphasise the importance of landscape in their considerations. Because of the location of the windfarm it is unlikely, or at the very least difficult to prove that any particular benefits would accrue to the social and economic development of the Park from its construction and operation. Conversely, while there is little conclusive research in this area and none to my knowledge that relates to National Parks there may well be the potential that if the attractiveness of the area is reduced in landscape terms then this could have consequential effects upon the economy given that a prime attraction of the Park is the quality of the landscape seen both from within and outside of the legislative boundary.

## Conclusion

38. With regard to the aims of the Park the major factor with this proposal is the landscape impact of the turbines on the natural heritage and the consequential effects of that landscape impact upon the other 3 aims. This proposal presents a particular difficulty in that its conclusion is that the effects of the proposal upon the landscape integrity of the Cairngorms National Park would be of a minor overall effect (although some localised areas could be subject to a moderate effect). As with earlier proposals your officers would place a greater emphasis upon the National Park as a material consideration in the assessment of the proposal, what could be a moderate effect upon elements of a landscape of national importance should be carefully considered and in my view may well be unacceptable. However, the main problem with this proposal as it stands is the basic lack of information to make an informed decision regarding its impacts upon the integrity of the Park. The assessment comes to the conclusion that the visual effects would not be significant but this is based on just one viewpoint from the Ladder Hills and even from this viewpoint the majority of the turbines would be visible as would the turbines of the Kildrummy windfarm should it be approved. To properly assess the impacts of the proposal viewpoints from Morven, Ben Avon and possibly Lochnagar should be considered as well as a viewpoint from Craig nan Eunan which is the closest point of the Park boundary to the windfarm. The proposal for the much smaller 11 turbine windfarm at Kildrummy, although a little

closer to the Park boundary did consider the landscape and visual impacts of that windfarm from Morven and Lochnagar.

39. Of additional concern is the issue of cumulative landscape impact and the precedent that such proposals set for more windfarms within close proximity to a national and internationally recognised landscape. It is understood that the Scottish Executive may in the future consider some form of quota system for renewable energy development and this may be an appropriate way of ensuring that any particular area, particularly an important one in terms of natural and cultural heritage does continue to be subjected to potential cumulative visual and landscape impact from such developments.

## RECOMMENDATION

**That based on the information submitted in the form of the application and accompanying Environmental Statement it is recommended that the Cairngorms National Park Authority OBJECT to the proposal on the following grounds:**

- A) While to some extent subjective it is clear from the Environmental Statement that the proposal would result in some level of detrimental landscape and visual impact and cumulative landscape and visual impact from certain viewpoints within the Park, particularly from Morven and the Ladder Hills, the Environmental Statement does not include adequate viewpoint assessments to draw any firm conclusions upon the general effect of the proposal upon the overall landscape and integrity of the Cairngorms National Park. Further landscape and visual assessment should be carried out from the National Park.**
- B) The Park has previously objected to schemes which are considered to have a significant landscape impact upon the character and integrity of the National Park, consequently such proposals have been considered to produce potential detriment to peoples enjoyment of this special landscape and consequently to the detriment of the local tourism economy. Because of this, the precautionary approach should be adopted in this case until a more detailed level of assessment is carried out in line with recommendation A of this report.**

***Date 23 January 2005***

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