

APPENDIX 1.1 – STRATHY WOOD WIND FARM GRID CONNECTION ELECTRICITY ACT (ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (SCOTLAND) REGULATIONS 2017: SCREENING OPINION (JUNE 2019)

T: 0131-244-1011
E: christopher.park@gov.scot

By email only to: joanne.nicolson@sse.com

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Our Reference: ECU00001835
Your Reference: ELR483

Dear Joanne

ELECTRICITY ACT 1989

THE ELECTRICITY WORKS (ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT) (SCOTLAND) REGULATIONS 2017

On 23 April 2019 the Energy Consents Unit received a request for an EIA Screening Opinion from Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission plc (“the Applicant”) for a proposed 4 km long, 132 kV woodpole overhead electricity line (“the proposed development”) within the Highland Council planning authority area. The proposed Development will connect the existing Strathy North substation to a new substation proposed within Strathy Wood.

Under regulation 8 of the Electricity Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2017 (“the Regulations”) the Scottish Ministers are required to adopt a screening opinion for the proposed Development. This letter contains such a screening opinion.

Characteristics of the proposed development

The proposed overhead line will be supported by an ‘H’ Pole, approximately 13-15m in height. The ‘H’ Poles will be spaced approximately 70-100m apart. The proposed development will connect to an incoming 132/33kV circuit at the Strathy North substation and terminates on a new 132kV transformer disconnector switch at Strathy Wood substation.

There is an existing access track already in place which will be used for construction vehicles, leading south from the A836 (east of the Strathy Village Hall), towards the Strathy North substation. The access track continues south beyond the Strathy North substation, to the proposed Strathy Wood substation site. The alignment is placed as close as possible to the access track, to minimise ground disturbance the number of temporary crossings required over the river Strathy during construction.

Other existing and approved developments in the vicinity include Strathy North and South wind farms, the Strathy North substation and the overhead lines leading into the substation.

Location of the proposed development

The proposed development is located in a rural area, approximately 6.5km south of Strathy,

Sutherland. Access to the will be via the existing access track to Strathy North substation and continuing south. It falls within the;

- Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Protection Area;
- Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Special Area of Conservation;
- Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Ramsar Site;
- West Halladale Biological Site of Special Scientific Interest, which approximately covers the same boundary as the RAMSAR/SPA/SAC, as shown in Figure 2.

There are two uninhabited properties in close proximity to the development: Dallangwell (approximately 150m from Strathy North Substation) and Braerathy Lodge (located adjacent to the currently proposed Strathy Wood substation).

Characteristics of the potential impact

The proposed development would lie alongside an existing track, extending the existing overhead line for a relatively short distance between substation locations. In an area which is characterised by large wind turbines, substation, commercial forestry, and overhead line, there is potentially a minor effect upon the character of the immediate landscape that the proposed development lies within and with negligible effects upon the wider Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCT overall.

Any future residents at Dallangwell and Braerathy Lodge would be potential sensitive visual receptors. However, in both locations, views of the proposed development may be limited by screening from landform or forestry and in the context of the consented/existing substations, wind turbines, and overhead line in the north.

There is the potential for effects from the proposed development on the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC. The Applicant has a stated a Habitats Regulations Appraisal (HRA) will be undertaken to assess the significance of any identified effects on the designated site. Potential effects from the Proposed Development are:

- loss or degradation of designated habitats during construction;
- damage or destruction of marsh saxifrage during construction;
- disturbance to otter or destruction or damage of resting sites during construction.

Due to the proposed development crossing part of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC there will be a significant effect on the qualifying interests of the SAC. Sufficient information needs to be included to assess the impacts of the proposal on the qualifying features of the SAC.

Potential effects of the proposed development on protected species are habitat loss during construction, disturbance to individuals and places of shelter during construction. The Applicant intends to undertake survey work to ascertain the presence or absence of protected species. It is possible that appropriate mitigation measures may reduce or remove significant effects on any protected species which may be present on site, but at this point such details cannot be ascertained.

The proposed development has the potential to damage or degrade GWTDE or peat habitats. Where possible, the Applicant intends that overhead line poles and access tracks will be micro-sited to avoid GWTDE habitats and floating bog mats will be utilised to avoid disruption to hydrological pathways.

There is potential for effects on the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA/Ramsar site and West Halladale Site of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI). Potential effects from the Proposed Development on designated sites are:

- Mortality of eggs or chicks during construction;
- disturbance and displacement of breeding birds during construction;
- habitat loss and degradation during construction;
- and Mortality of birds due to collision with the overhead line during operation.

Due to the proposed development crossing part of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA and the West Halladale SSSI there will be a potential significant effect on the SPA and SSSI. Sufficient information needs to be included to assess the impacts of the proposal on both.

The proposed development does not fall within any cultural heritage designations with the closest being Armadale Burn Schedule Monument 4.5km north west of the proposal.

Micrositing of the 'H' Poles will be undertaken to avoid the Historic Environment Record and Canmore sites within the proposed development extents, as far as practicably possible.

There is the potential for pollution effects to arise during construction, regarding temporary water crossings. These will be appropriately managed through the CEMP, CAR licence (if required), construction site licence and with the correct mitigation measures implemented, minimise any likely significant effects. A restoration plan will also be prepared to counteract any localised damage.

There is the potential for increased noise and vibration levels during construction of the proposed development. Construction noise effects will be managed through the CEMP which will include mitigation measures to minimise potential significant effects.

Consultation

The regulations require that Scottish Ministers consult the planning authority for its views on whether the proposed development constitutes EIA development. In view of the location of the development, the Scottish Ministers also consulted SNH and SEPA for their views on whether the proposal may have significant environmental effects.

The Highland Council (the relevant Planning Authority) stated that they generally accept the assessment submitted by the applicant. However, there are a number of other areas that could be explored further as the development, in their view, is likely to have a significant effect on the environment.

SNH advised that the proposal will cross protected areas of national and international importance, which is likely to have a significant effect on the environment. The proposal will cross the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA, construction and operation of the line may cause disturbance or displacement of qualifying species. SNH state that detailed assessments will be required to assess the impacts on all features of the SPA.

The route also crosses part of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC. The construction and operation of the proposed line could result in loss or damage to habitat, therefore further assessment is requested by SNH. Ideally access options would avoid excavation and direct

vehicle impacts on the qualifying habitats of designated sites. For areas where temporary access is required, SNH would welcome a peat depth survey to accompany any section 37 application.

SNH have also requested that any section 37 application is accompanied with an assessment of the potential impacts on the West Halladale SSSI.

SEPA stated that based on the information submitted they consider that, with respect to interests relevant to their remit, the proposed development will be unlikely to have a significant effect (in the context of the Regulations) on the environment for their interests. This is on the assumption that modest or plainly and easily achievable environmental mitigation measures will be put in place.

EIA Screening and Conclusions

The proposed development is schedule 2 development as defined in the regulations. The proposal is likely to have a significant effect on the environment in ecological terms given that it will cross designated areas of national and international importance.

Having considered the views of The Highland Council, as well as taking account of the information received from SNH and SEPA, the Scottish Ministers consider that the proposed Development is **EIA development** and any forthcoming application for consent (under section 37 of the Electricity Act 1989) **does require** to be accompanied by a full Environmental Impact Assessment report.

In reaching this conclusion, the Scottish Ministers have had regard to the information supplied by Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission plc in the request for a screening opinion and the selection criteria set out in Schedule 3 of the Regulations as relevant to the proposed Development.

The consultation responses have been provided to you for your full consideration. In accordance with regulation 7(4) this screening opinion is copied to The Highland Council as planning authority.

Yours sincerely

Chris Park

Energy Consents