Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks

TRANSMISSION

Hurlie 400kV Substation
Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)
Volume 4 | Appendix 7.2

Woodland Report

November 2024

Scottish & Southern Electricity Networks

TRANSMISSION

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site location

1.1.1 The Proposed Development and the Forestry Study Area (FSA) is located within an extensive area of commercial forestry, known as the Mearns Forest. The land is part of Scotland's National Forest Estate, owned by Scottish Ministers on behalf of the nation, and managed by Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS). The FSA extends to 496.4 ha and is shown in **Figure 7.1: Forestry Study Area in Volume 2**.

1.1.2 The Mearns Forest has existing electricity transmission infrastructure present as the existing 275 kV overhead line (OHL) that connects the existing Fetteresso substation with Kintore substation.

1.1.3 The appendix should be read in conjunction with **Chapter 7: Forestry**, **Chapter 10: Ecology and Biodiversity** and **Chapter 3: Description of the Proposed Development (Volume 2)** of the **EIA Report** for full details of the Proposed Development.

1.2 Terminology and Survey Area

1.2.1 The following terminology will be used throughout this report:

- Site: all land within the planning application (red line) boundary (**Figure 1.1: Site Location**);
- Proposed Development: The infrastructure including the platform, bays, control buildings, access tracks, drainage and landscape features and temporary construction compounds (see Section 3.3 in **Chapter 3: Description of the Proposed Development**);

1.3 Woodland Characteristics

1.3.1 The broad species composition of the FSA is shown in **Table 1** below and in **Volume 4, Figure 7.2 Baseline Species Composition**.

Table 1. Species Composition Across the FSA by Area (ha)

Species	Area (ha)	Area (%)
Sitka spruce	215.1	43.33
Sitka spruce/Other conifer	60.5	12.19
Other conifer	136.1	27.42
Mixed broadleaves	16.6	3.34
Open ground	68.1	13.72
Total	**496.4**	**100.0**

1.3.2 The main species within the FSA are commercial conifers, principally Sitka spruce, which is present in pure or mixed stands, and accounts for 55.7% of the total FSA. Other conifers account for 27.4% of the FSA and broadleaf woodland 3.3%. Open ground accounts for 13.7%.

1.3.3 The woodlands within the Site have a diverse age class due to the ongoing felling and replanting programmes over many years.

1.3.4 None of the woodlands within the FSA are recorded in the Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI) Scotland. Small areas are recorded as native woodland in the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland. However, comparison with the Mearns FDP and the National Forest Estate sub-compartments identifies that the areas classed as native woodland are in fact comprised of commercial conifers or open ground.

2. DEVELOPMENT REQUIREMENTS

2.1.1 Within the Site, areas of crop will require to be felled to accommodate the construction and operation of the Proposed Development. The felling programme for the Proposed Development will largely be driven by the construction programme, bird breeding seasons and ecological constraints. Please refer to **Chapter 3: Description of the Proposed Development (Volume 2)** of the **EIA Report** for further information on the construction programme.

2.1.2 In this case, taking into account the ecological constraints, a 5 m buffer has been applied around each item of temporary or permanent infrastructure. An indicative 50 m corridor has been applied to all new access tracks and upgraded existing tracks to be used for construction purposes.

3. WIND BLOW RISK

3.1.1 There is a windblow risk across the Site and management felling will be required to achieve a windfirm edge. The management felling of 29.7 ha helps mitigate against woodland fragmentation, windblow and isolation while maintaining a windfirm edge.

3.1.2 The Proposed Development will result in some fragmentation and isolation of small forestry coupes, although with the measures put in place to mitigate for the permanent loss of woodland by the Proposed Development through planting (refer to **Volume 2 Chapter 3 Description of Proposed Development** & **Figure 3.3: Landscape Design**) to satisfy the requirements of the Control of Woodland Removal Policy within the Site including restocking with evergreen conifers, there is no significant effect on the overall fragmentation/isolation of the forest.

4. WOODLAND MANAGEMENT IMPACT

4.1.1 The baseline assessment of the FSA was limited to a desk-based study, using information provided by FLS and other published data with greater detail provided in **Chapter 7: Forestry**. A walk-over survey was not possible due to access restrictions imposed by FLS across the FSA. The desk-based assessment has been calibrated based on recent walk over surveys undertaken as part of the baseline forestry assessment for the Kintore to Tealing 400 kV OHL, beyond but close to the FSA. This, together with the experience of the assessors and familiarity with the wider Fetteresso area, is considered by the assessors to provide a sufficiently reliable baseline on which to enable an informed decision to be taken in relation to the identification and assessment of likely significant environmental effects on Forestry.

4.1.2 The following effects have been 'scoped out' of detailed assessment, as proposed in the EIA Scoping Report (see **Appendix 6.1: Scoping Report**):

- Once operational, the Proposed Development would have no effect on the commercial operation of the forest. Maintenance visits by SSEN Transmission to the Proposed Development will be occasional and maintenance vehicles will access the substation using the existing forest tracks. As is the case with the existing Fetteresso substation, the Applicant will establish a regular dialogue with FLS so that it is aware of any forest operations which might temporality limit access to the Proposed Development, once it is operational (further information on maintenance is included in **Chapter 3: Description of the Proposed Development**); and
- It is considered that implications for future forest management outside of the Site in terms of felling phases, risk of windblow, replanting on site and wayleave maintenance can be adequately addressed through appropriate agreements with the relevant landowners.

4.1.3 No significant effect on woodland management is anticipated. While the Proposed Development will influence the extent of and approach to woodland management across the wider FSA, arrangements to ensure appropriate management will be agreed between the SSEN Transmission and the landowner.

5. MITIGATION OPPORTUNITIES

5.1 Forestry

5.1.1 The Landscape Design (see **Figure 3.3: Landscape Design**), provides proposals for new planting as part of wider landscape, forest and ecological mitigation which aims to satisfy the requirements of the Control of Woodland Removal Policy within the Site including restocking with evergreen conifers.

5.1.2 In addition, it is anticipated that planting and woodland management on land controlled by SSEN Transmission will be secured by Aberdeenshire Council through a planning condition, which will ensure adherence to relevant policies, including but not limited to:

- Right Tree in the Right Place;
- Control of Woodland Removal Policy;
- UK Forestry Standard; and
- UK Woodland Assurance Standard.

5.1.3 As set out in **Volume 2 Chapter 10: Ecology**, section 10.4 and **Volume 4, Appendix 10.4: BNG Report**, the Landscape Design has been calculated to result in a BNG gain of 4%. To achieve a 10% BNG, SSEN Transmission will enter into agreements with other landowners and BNG project developers to procure agreements that will deliver a further 6% through offsite projects.

5.1.4 In addition, SSEN Transmission is committed to providing compensatory planting, as set out in **Volume 4: Appendix 7.1: Compensatory Planting Strategy**. The extent of compensatory planting has been calculated as 76.64 ha and will include a range of deciduous and evergreen trees along with shrub and grass habitats.

5.2 Other environmental aspects

5.2.1 The Mearns Forest is a recreational asset that is used for walking and cycling along the established forest tracks. The Principal Contractor and SSEN Transmission will work closely with FLS to ensure that adequate signage, fencing and safety information is provided for to ensure that the construction phase of the Proposed Development can be undertaken without unauthorised or accidental access by the public to the Site.

5.2.2 Schedule 1 birds (please refer to **Chapter 11: Ornithology**) are known to be present in the wider Mearns Forest. The Principal Contractor will follow the procedures within the Bird Species Protection Plan adopted by SSEN Transmission during the construction phase to ensure appropriate protection measures are in place for all protected birds.

5.2.3 The Principal Contractor, and SSEN Transmission with cooperate with FLS to maintain access for their forestry operations during the construction of the Proposed Development which could include such measures as upgrading existing forest roads.

6. WOODLAND LOSS

6.1.1 **Table 2: Woodland Felling** details the extent of woodland felling by type and area required for the construction of the Proposed Development. Definitions are provided below.

Table 2. Woodland Felling

Felling Type	Area (ha)	Area (%)
No Felling – open ground	68.1	13.7
Infrastructure Felling	87.4	17.6
Management Felling	29.7	6.0
No Felling - woodland	311.2	62.7
Total	**496.4**	**100.0**

6.1.2 Infrastructure Felling – the gross area of felling required to clear the area for construction of the Proposed Development. Felling would be undertaken by SSEN Transmission and would involve clear felling of all trees within this infrastructure buffer.

6.1.3 Management Felling – this would comprise an additional area of felling outside of the infrastructure buffer for the purposes of managing wind blow risk and/or forest design purposes (landowner to fell under forest plan revision) and would involve clear felling all trees to a windfirm edge.

6.1.4 The total felling required for the construction of the Proposed Development, both the infrastructure and management felling, totals 117.1 ha. The management felling of 29.7 ha helps mitigate against woodland fragmentation, windblow and isolation while maintaining a windfirm edge. Both the infrastructure and management felling areas are shown on **Figure 7.1: Proposed Development Felling Plan** in **Volume 3**.

6.1.5 Responsibility for felling will be negotiated between SSEN Transmission and the landowner as part of the access agreement.

6.1.6 As indicated above and in **Appendix 7.1: Compensatory Planting Strategy**, the Applicant will procure compensatory new planting off site to provide for 100% of all woodland loss. The nature of new woodland planting will be negotiated with all relevant stakeholders. Setting aside the provisions of compensatory planting, the changes in the structure of the woodlands due to the Proposed Development can be summarized as follows:

- there would be a net reduction in the total area of woodland of 87.4 ha;
- permanent open ground would total 87.4 ha; and
- the net reduction in stocked woodland area within the FSA would be equivalent to 17.6% of the FSA.

6.1.7 Areas cleared for the purposes of construction, such as the principal and satellite lay down areas, and soil storage areas, will be replanted. Taken with the new planting proposed as part of the Landscape Design (**Figure 3.3: Landscape Design**) previously referred to, the changes in woodland type can be summarized as follows:

- there would be an increase in stocked woodland area of 10.76 ha;
- permanent open ground would total 76.64 ha; and
- the net reduction in stocked woodland area within the FSA would be equivalent to 15.4% of the FSA.