

John Muir Trust
Response to Scottish Hydro Electric
Transmission
Beauly – Loch Buidhe Reinforcement
Consultation 5th November 2015



1) SUMMARY

The John Muir Trust welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Project consultation. The Trust is the leading wild land conservation charity in the United Kingdom and is a membership organisation that seeks to ensure that wild land is protected and enhanced and that wild places are valued by and for everyone. The Trust has considerable experience of assessing transmission projects with regard to visual, cumulative and landscape impacts with particular focus on wild land. The Trust also liaises with policy-makers regarding national energy infra-structure planning as public bodies – Ofgem, DECC and government decision-makers - have a duty to ensure energy networks are well-planned with least cost to the public and least damage to our natural and cultural heritage, whilst ensuring security of electricity supply.

Presently it is unclear from the documents available what the needs case, i.e. the requirement, for the strategic plan or programme (of which the Beauly – Loch Buidhe project is clearly a part) is. A Strategic Environmental Assessment of possible alternatives in such a plan or programme is required under the SEA legislation and must have been adequately considered. There is no reference to such a study in the consultation documents. For consultation to be meaningful, and before any further work, the strategic case and cost benefit analyses for this project must be fully made and available to the public.

All of the options for the Project being currently consulted on are assessed by the developer as having impacts on nationally designated or locally important landscapes, including Wild Land Area 29 and Dornoch Firth National Scenic Area. These and other natural heritage designated sites need to be carefully assessed and due regard given. The cumulative impact of this project with other infra-structure on the visual and landscape resource of Sutherland and Ross-shire must be considered.

2) RELEVANCE OF THE JOHN MUIR TRUST'S EXPERIENCE

The John Muir Trust is the leading wild land charity in the UK whose foremost aim is the protection and enhancement of wild land and wild places. The Trust works extensively, alongside energy experts, on strategic energy and transmission issues because of the extensive impacts that energy developments are having on wild land.

The Trust has gained considerable expertise about the strategic technical and economic aspects of transmission, as a leading objector at the Public Local Inquiry (PLI) for the Beauly-Denny, 220km, 400kV transmission line in 2007, and subsequently. To consider the evidence at that Inquiry, the Trust benefited from advice from energy and economic experts including Sir Donald Miller, ex-Chairman of Scottish Power, Colin Gibson, Ex Networks Director of National Grid, and Professor Andrew Bain, Emeritus Professor of Economics. Some of the evidence presented at the Beauly-Denny Public Local Inquiry is very relevant to this Consultation.

The Trust's submission is informed by its experience of considering, with the advice

of independent experts, the costs, technical case and environmental impacts of a transmission line passing through a National Park and sensitive nationally important landscapes – i.e. the 220km Beaully – Denny line.

3) **STRATEGIC ISSUES**

Part of a Plan or Programme - so Strategic Environmental Assessment required

The Project information demonstrates that this is a strategic project which is part of a wider Plan or Programme but there is no evidence that this major project and associated sub-stations, etc. have been assessed as part of a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the wider network plan.

Since it is clearly part of a Plan or Programme, this Strategic Environmental Assessment is required.

The Trust view is that Ofgem's and SHET(L)'s environmental duties were not adequately undertaken at Beaully Denny. So it is critical that both Ofgem and SHET learn from those mistakes, demonstrate the technical need and economic case to the public and stakeholders and implement any new transmission in the Highlands with minimal impacts.

Ofgem and the Scottish Government, through its Agencies, have duties including specific environmental duties and are required to ensure adequate Strategic Environmental Assessments have been undertaken where appropriate, to ensure the correct decision-making occurs.

Holistic assessment of costs and benefits required

Electricity generation and transmission planning and costs should be considered at the same time and across the GB electricity network to achieve the best solution for the national good. SHET must ensure that they deliver on their statutory duty to the public in a holistic way - considering all significant economic, social and environmental costs.

At the Beaully Denny 400kV 220km transmission line Public Local Inquiry in 2007, evidence which was given by the Applicants for that development - led by SHET(L) - and the subsequent practical delivery of the BD project demonstrated totally inadequate cost-benefit analysis of a major overhead line. SHET are also the developers in this case. Moreover, Ofgem failed to anticipate the full costs of the Beaully-Denny line and the Public Local Inquiry Reporters failed to appreciate the true impacts on the environment and the affected communities. It is essential, if public confidence in the Applicant and the public bodies is not to be further eroded, that lessons are learned and applied by all parties, in this case.

The Trust considers it essential that, for the Project under consideration, adequate cost benefit studies and comparisons are done and put into the public domain. There is no evidence of this in the scanty material available.

4) **CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT BEAULY - LOCH BUIDHE 275kV LINE, AS PART OF THIS NETWORK**

Need for this new line not demonstrated

A key concern that the Trust has specifically about the Beaully – Loch Buidhe part of the network is that the case for this 275kV line has not been demonstrated. This upgrade would appear to be predicated on significant increases in electricity generation from windfarms in north Highlands, many of which are not consented and which, under current subsidy regimes, are highly uncertain. Therefore, SHET has not

yet made an adequate case for the Beauly – Loch Buidhe Project in principle.

In the very limited information on the requirement for this 275kV line, the statement is made that “*The existing 132kV overhead line between Beauly and Shin is now at capacity and reinforcement is therefore required.*” However, the information gives no detail of the capacity of the existing 275kV Dounreay line. Dounreay is no longer using the line so, even allowing for northern wind farms and hydro which are built or consented, it seems very likely that this line is NOT at capacity. **Furthermore, if the current single-circuit 275kV line is at full capacity, then can the same pylons be strung for a double-circuit?** The public don’t know but this question must be answered.

No evidence in public domain of cost-benefit analysis for Beauly – Loch Buidhe

Experience of similar schemes demonstrates that the developer’s initial cost estimates for the project might well increase significantly, thereby undermining the economic basis of the project. In the case of the Beauly Denny transmission line, the actual costs virtually doubled from the estimate given by SSE and Scottish Power to the Public Local Inquiry (PLI) in 2007. This actual outcome is in line with estimates in evidence which was presented by objectors. Hence, even if there is a case in principle for this Project, SHET must provide an adequate cost-benefit analysis based on realistic project costs (including the assumption that it is reasonable to expect that, within our democratic planning process, a Public Inquiry is likely to take place for such a large, environmentally-impacting project).

It was argued by Sir Donald Miller at the Beauly Denny PLI, and is clear in retrospect, that the “East coast” overhead route that Sir Donald proposed would have similar or less costs and have less severe impacts on nationally valued landscapes than the approved BD route. Moreover, sub-sea cables are also coming forward elsewhere in the UK – a technology which was claimed to be too expensive for BD. Both alternative options should have been properly assessed as alternatives under Strategic Environmental Assessment and that process put into the public domain.

Similarly, for the Beauly Loch Buidhe reinforcement, SHET must demonstrate publicly that alternatives have been adequately assessed as part of an SEA process.

The lack of a clear case for the Project in principle and uncertain cost estimates could both lead to unnecessary added costs to electricity consumer bills, which is not in the public interest.

Technical “needs” case not in evidence

The technical “needs” case must be well-evidenced and in the public domain, unlike the BD situation where the Beauly Denny PLI Technical Assessor said,

“My conclusion is that the Applicants’ technical case for transmission network reinforcement to the full 400kV standard based on a deterministic approach is unconvincing.”

However, this evidence came forward so far down the decision-making process that it was not taken on board – as there was no other alternative being put forward by that stage. The Application was given planning approval. A lesson from the Beauly Denny process is that such an analysis must be undertaken at an early stage and available to the public.

5) VISUAL, LANDSCAPE AND CUMULATIVE ISSUES

All of the options being currently consulted on for the Project are assessed by the developer as having impacts on nationally important natural heritage sites, including Wild Land Area 29 and Dornoch Firth National Scenic Area, as well as cultural and

locally important landscape sites. Impacts on these and other natural heritage designated sites need to be carefully assessed and due regard given. The cumulative impact of this project with other infra-structure on the visual and landscape resource of Sutherland and Ross-shire must be fully considered.

Mitigation isn't optional

A further relevant aspect is examples of conditions imposed for mitigation in similar projects being ignored. It was a condition for mitigation at Beaulieu Denny that the major construction "tracks", which are the width of a single carriageway road, would be removed i.e. they were temporary. However, many land owners have been encouraged by the developers to ask for retrospective planning permission and most of these applications have been approved. The roads are there as a permanent scar and many people view them as having an even more negative visual impact than the actual pylons and conductor wires. So a firm and binding commitment to minimising the residual impacts, such as removing tracks, needs to be made in the event that this project progresses.

6) CONCLUSIONS

It will not be acceptable for public money to be allocated to an environmentally damaging - and potentially socially and economically damaging - project without all the true costs and benefits of alternatives being considered and that detail being made available to the public. There are legal duties for the public to be consulted, including through the undertaking and making available a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the over-arching strategic transmission plan or programme.

Both SHET and Ofgem have legal duties to ensure that the environment is correctly protected. This duty allows SHET to propose, and Ofgem to accept, a more expensive option if it is environmentally required – for instance, an alternative route; undergrounding if in appropriate terrain or sub-sea links.

Lessons must be learned from other projects within the UK and under Ofgem's remit – in particular, the Beaulieu Denny transmission project. SHET have a very particular duty to make sure the project is proposed, consulted on and, if appropriate, delivered using "best practice". This applies to all of the following –

- a) the technical assessment of the need for the project**
- b) the cost benefit analysis**
- c) environmental impacts**

Whilst the Trust appreciates that SHET are consulting specifically on this project, it is essential that the wider network is considered together by UK and Scottish governments and also by organisations licensed by government to undertake nationally significant projects. Total Systems costs and environmental and social impacts need holistic consideration and lessons must be learned from similar projects.

SHET must ensure that they are delivering on their duty to the public in a holistic way, considering all significant economic, social and environmental costs. This must be evidence-based and available publicly.

SHET must show that the consultation will be meaningful and properly considered.

Helen McDade, Head of Policy