

Appendix 6.2c - Assessment of Effects on Wild Land Area 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee)

Introduction	1
The Scope of the Assessment	2
Likely Effects on WLQ 6	2
Conclusion	4
Cumulative Effects	4
Figure 1: Wild Land Area 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee) with Blade Tip ZTV	
Figure 2: Wild Land Area 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee) with Hub Height ZTV	
Figure 3: Wild Land Area 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee) with Creag Riabhach Blade Tip ZTV	

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Introduction

Wild Land Area 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee) lies a minimum of around 8.5 km to the north-west of the Proposed Development, as shown on Figure 1. The Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) 'Description of Wild Land Areas' (2017) for Wild Land Area 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee) provides a useful initial brief overview of this WLA:

"This large Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 569 km² across north west Sutherland, extending from the peatlands of Crask in the south east to the mountain of Foinaven in the north west. The northern half of the WLA mainly comprises a complex range of high mountains in addition to a peninsula of lower hills extending towards Durness. In contrast, the southern half of the WLA includes extensive peatlands and the isolated mountain of Ben Hee."

Viewpoints 17 (Cnoc an Alaskie) and 18 (Ben Hee) lie within this WLA.

The following assessment follows guidance set out in NatureScot's 'Assessing Impacts on Wild Land Technical Guidance' (September 2020) with reference to the SNH 'Description of Wild Land Areas' (2017).

The WLA description lists six key attributes/qualities (which have been numbered 1 to 6 for the purpose of this assessment) for WLA 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee):

- 1. *"Towering, rugged mountains, highlighted by their prominent rock covering, that appear awe-inspiring and contribute to a strong sense of naturalness.*
- 2. *A remote, secluded interior with very few human elements and a strong perception of sanctuary and solitude.*
- 3. *A variety of shelves, corries and basins carved into the mountain landforms that harbour a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude- some with lochs, rivers and waterfalls.*
- 4. *A complex mix of towering and arresting crags, cliffs and knolls with a predominance of bare rock, conveying a strong sense of naturalness.*
- 5. *Long straths and glens that penetrate far into the interior – some with tracks or paths, that provide access through the landscape.*
- 6. *Extensive peatland slopes that appear awe-inspiring in their simplicity and contrast to neighbouring mountains, and allow wide open views of the surrounding area."*

These key attributes/qualities (hereafter referred to as Wild Land Qualities, or WLQs) form the basis of the wild land assessment as they express the distinctive and specific wildness qualities that are found in this WLA. The WLA description provides further information on each of these WLQs as an explanation of how the various aspects of the landscape contribute to the WLQ.

Figures 1 and 2 show the blade tip and hub height ZTVs of the Proposed Development in relation to the WLA. These indicate that there is very intermittent theoretical visibility of the Proposed Development, almost exclusively from the southernmost part of the WLA, which is covered by the peatlands. This is gained from a minimum of 8.5 km away. Much of this visibility is blade only, which means that the hubs of the turbines will not be visible. There is a further area of more distant visibility (a minimum of 22 km away) from the high ground around Ben Hee and one very small area of visibility in the north, 44 km away.

OPEN has reviewed the potential effects that the Proposed Development may have on each of these six WLQs in relation to their physical attributes and perceptual responses. This review has indicated that the effect on the of the first five WLQs will be negligible or very limited at most due to the nature of their attributes and responses and the relationship of the Proposed Development with these. There is, however, potential for a slightly greater effect on certain aspects of the sixth WLQ – *“Extensive peatland slopes that appear awe-inspiring in their simplicity and contrast to neighbouring mountains, and allow wide open views of the surrounding area”* – and this is reviewed below.

The Scope of the Assessment

The NatureScot technical guidance (2020) sets out the suggested approach to the assessment of effects on wild land. Paragraph 13 of the guidance notes that *“the assessment approach...should be:*

- *concise and proportionate, focused on likely significant effects on the qualities;”*

The need for a WLA assessment is discussed in Paragraphs 5 and 6 of the NatureScot guidance, which note that:

“This guidance should only be applied to proposals whose nature, siting, scale or design are likely to result in a significant effect on the qualities of a WLA. Given this, assessments are more likely for proposals within a WLA, and are less-likely for proposals outwith the WLA.

An assessment will only be required where it has been deemed necessary by the competent authority. You are encouraged to discuss the need for an assessment with the competent authority at an early stage.”

While the Proposed Development lies outwith this WLA, The Highland Council (THC) has requested that a wild land assessment be carried out.

Paragraph 14 of NatureScot guidance (2020) notes that:

“The assessment may comprise a brief statement or a more detailed report depending on the significance and complexity of effects, and may include annotated photographs and a table summarising impacts and their effects. Examples of assessments produced can be viewed on the NatureScot website, which will be updated as and when further examples illustrating good practice become available.”

On OPEN’s view a proportionate assessment for this WLA consists of a review of the likely effects of the Proposed Development on the attributes and responses of WLQ 6, . This is carried out below.

Likely Effects on WLQ 6

WLQ 6 is *“Extensive peatland slopes that appear awe-inspiring in their simplicity and contrast to neighbouring mountains, and allow wide open views of the surrounding area”*.

The potential implication of the Proposed Development on this WLQ are discussed below in relation to the factors described in SNH’s description of the WLQ. These are discussed paragraph by paragraph as they appear in the SNH description with the SNH description text shown in bold italics. The SNH description has been verified on-site by OPEN, and appropriate updates to the baseline situation are also described.

“The southern part of the WLA comprises an extensive area of gently-sloping or flat peatland near the landmark mountain of Ben Hee. The striking contrast of the peatland and mountain landforms, in combination with a simple ground cover and strong sense of openness, generates a sense of awe.”

This paragraph relates to the perceptual response *“a sense of awe”* which, in this case, arises from the *“striking contrast of the peatland and mountain landforms, in combination with a simple ground cover and strong sense of openness”*. The Proposed Development lies to the south-east of the WLA, beyond the southern peatlands,

and will therefore not interrupt the relationship between the peatland and the mountains. The Proposed Development will also not affect the simple ground cover of the peatlands.

The Proposed Development could affect the *“strong sense of openness”* of the peatlands as a result of the introduction of large-scale vertical features in part of its setting. However, where they are visible, the low elevation of the turbines very often ensures that they are not seen at full height and are almost always backdropped by landform, as can be seen at Viewpoint 17. This ensures that the Proposed Development has very limited vertical impact and this, combined with its small horizontal extent and intermittent and relatively distant influence (a minimum of 8.5 km away), ensures that it will not significantly affect the *“strong sense of openness”* of the peatlands.

It can therefore be concluded that the Proposed Development does not have potential to significantly affect the *“sense of awe”* as it is expressed in this WLQ.

“There is a strong perception of naturalness within the peatland on account of its random pattern of rough vegetation, lochs, dubh lochan, bogs and peat hags at a detail level, as well as its exposure at a broad scale, highlighted by ‘wide skies’ revealing dynamic weather conditions. The rugged ground at a local level also makes access difficult and physically challenging. Altogether, these factors contribute to a perception of high risk.”

The Proposed Development will not affect the *“random pattern of rough vegetation, lochs, dubh lochan, bogs and peat hags”*, the *“exposure at a broad scale”*, or the rugged ground or physical challenge that constitute part of WLQ 6. It will therefore not affect the physical attributes *“a strong perception of naturalness”* and *“landform which is rugged, or otherwise physically challenging”* that are referred to in this paragraph, and in turn will not affect the *“perception of high risk”* found within this WLQ.

“The peatland within this WLA is visited by few people, partly due to its difficult access; however it forms an important component of key views looking into the WLA from outside the edge along the A836 and A838 main roads. Within these views, the peatland provides a simple, open fore and midground to the mountains beyond and, in doing so, highlights the distinct qualities of each that conveys a strong sense of awe. The peatland also provides open views to other neighbouring wild land areas, including to Ben More Assynt (WLA 34) and Ben Klibreck (WLA 35), so these contribute to the area’s wild land qualities.”

The first two sentences of this paragraph relate to views into the WLA that are gained from outwith its boundary. This is noted in paragraph 3 of the NatureScot guidance (2020):

“This guidance sets out a methodology and general principles for assessing the impact of development and other proposals on WLAs, as they are experienced from within the WLA, not from outwith. It supports the Scottish Planning Policy.”

The effect that the Proposed Development may have on views into the WLA from the A836 and A838, as described in the first part of this paragraph, are therefore not considered in this review.

The final sentence of the paragraph relates to views from the peatlands to other WLAs, including WLAs 34 and 35. A comparison of the location of these WLAs with the ZTV for the Proposed Development indicates that the Proposed Development will not be seen in the line of visibility of any views towards the other WLAs from WLA 37.

The Proposed Development will therefore not affect the factors raised in this paragraph of the description of WLQ 6.

“A simplicity of landcover and landform means it is typically difficult to perceive scale and distance across the peatland, so the WLA often appears more extensive than its actual size. This also means, where human

elements are seen, particularly around the margins of the WLA, these are highly prominent across a wide area; for example the Fiag forest plantation and the road, inn, telecom masts and shelter belts around The Crask.

This extensive visibility of human artefacts and contemporary land use outside the WLA influences the wild land qualities within the southern part of the area over relatively far distances, although other attributes may be strong, such as ruggedness and perceived naturalness.”

These two paragraphs express the physical attributes and perceptual responses that are perhaps most relevant in the potential effects of the Proposed Development on WLQ 6. In particular *“where human elements are seen, particularly around the margins of the WLA, these are highly prominent across a wide area... This extensive visibility of human artefacts and contemporary land use outside the WLA influences the wild land qualities within the southern part of the area over relatively far distances”*.

The effect on this part of WLQ 6 is dependent on the level of visibility of the Proposed Development from within the southern part of the WLA and how it will be seen in views from within the WLA. The ZTVs in Figures 1 and 2 show very intermittent theoretical visibility of the Proposed Development, from this area, gained from a minimum of 8.5 km away. Much of this visibility is blade only, which means that the hubs of the turbines will not be visible. Viewpoint 17 lies within this area and illustrates the higher level of visibility that is likely to be gained due to its relatively high elevation in relation to the majority of the peatlands. The effect on the view gained from Viewpoint 17 is assessed to be **not significant**, and this will also apply to other views from within the southern part of the WLA, for similar reasons. Importantly, the low level of the Proposed Development and its containment by landform ensures that it will not appear as a prominent external feature in views from the WLA.

Conclusion

The review carried out above has concluded that there is not potential for the Proposed Development to lead to significant effects on the Foinaven-Ben Hee WLA in terms of the WLQs, physical attributes and perceptual responses. This is due to three key factors:

- the location of the Proposed Development outwith the WLA, which precludes effects on certain attributes, responses and WLQs;
- the nature of the WLQs, which limits the potential effect of the Proposed Development on the WLA; and
- the very intermittent, limited, and relatively distant visibility of the Proposed Development that can be gained from the WLA, and its low-lying nature, which ensures that it will not appear as a prominent external feature.

The Proposed Development will therefore have a **not significant** effect on the Foinaven-Ben Hee WLA.

Cumulative Effects on WLA 37 (Foinaven-Ben Hee)

The key wind farm in the assessment of cumulative effects on this WLA is Creag Riabhach, which lies partly within the WLA, as shown on Figure 3. Viewpoint 17 illustrates the type of visibility of Creag Riabhach that can be gained from within the WLA, along with that of the Proposed Development and other wind farms.

The cumulative magnitude of change arising from the addition of the Proposed Development to the operational and consented wind farm scenario, which includes Creag Riabhach as well as other more distant wind farms, is restricted by the limited, distant and not significant effect of the Proposed Development itself on the WLA. Its location to the south-east of the WLA, where it has a broad visual association with other, more distant, wind farms around Lairg, is also relevant as it will not extend wind farm influence to otherwise unaffected parts of the setting to the WLA. These factors limit the contribution of the Proposed Development to the cumulative situation, irrespective of the level of visibility and influence of Creag Riabhach.

The cumulative effect on the Foinaven-Ben Hee WLA will be **not significant**.

References

Landscape Institute and IEMA (2013). *Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment: Third Edition*. Landscape Institute and IEMA.

NatureScot (2020). *Assessing Impacts on Wild Land Areas Technical Guidance*. NatureScot.

SNH (2012). *Assessing the Cumulative Impact of Onshore Wind Energy Developments*. SNH.

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