

# SCOTTISH WILD LAND GROUP

Registered Charity No: SC004014

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Stuart Black

Director of Development and Infrastructure

The Highland Council

Kintail House

Beechwood Business Park

Inverness IV2 3BW

Dear Mr Black

**Planning Reference: 16/04506/FUL**

**Construction of a hydro scheme on the East Glenquoich Estate on the Allt Fearnà**

I am writing on behalf of the Scottish Wild Land Group [SWLG] which is a Scottish Charity that represents the interests of wild land and related matters. We aim to support initiatives that reduce the attrition of wild land, help to promote environmentally sensitive land and wildlife management, and support restoration of degraded habitats and rare species. We are Scotland's only wild land charity.

We have decided to make an **OBJECTION** to planning application 16/04506/FUL. We outline the grounds for this below.

**Wild Land Issues:** The development proposal is in Wild Land Area [WLA] 18 of the SNH identified and defined areas [the LVIA Interim Summary erroneously states it is in WLA 24, additionally, this essential fact is ignored by the Applicant's submission Design and Access Statement]. As such this puts a requirement on the Highland Council to consider the intrusiveness of the proposed development and its potential to impact on wild land quality. The Council will be aware that Mr Paul Wheelhouse, former Scottish Government environment minister and now energy minister, has brought WLAs into a consideration for planning purposes. So how would this development fit with the recognition given to Wild

Land by the Scottish Government planning system? The Highland Council will have to assess the reputational risk if they consent this development proposal.

In common with comparable documentation from other developers for similar schemes, the LVIA Interim Summary acknowledges that the construction phase will result in adverse visual impacts but suggests that this will reduce after commissioning and with time if the works are built to achieve this. We are doubtful, from our experience of monitoring such developments all over Scotland, receiving visual and descriptive data from members and site visits, that this will be the case. Construction standards would need to be robust and site specific, with genuine proposals, and delivery on, plans for restoration and reinstatement. The planning authority would need to set conditions as required and to be in a position to monitor these throughout construction, commissioning and maintenance, and to enforce should this prove to be necessary. We appreciate this would be resource demanding.

Of particular concern is the fact that this is not a small run of the river scheme; there is to be a dam built across Loch Fearn at significant altitude at 550 metres, so there will be permanent visual impact in a WLA, especially if there is, and this is inevitable, additional visual impacts due to drawdown as well as a constructed dam, penstock and an access track. The location for the development is overlooked by anyone doing the extremely popular traverse of the Munros Spidean Mialach and Gleouraich and may also be prominent in views from Gairich, another very popular Munro, just to the south west of the site, across Loch Quoich. The visual impacts of the existing access hydro tracks in views from the latter have been commented on by our members and others, [and can be seen from the Applicant's illustrations] and any further construction will add to this. Loch Quoich is usually unsightly due to drawdown, and this proposed development will further add to the attrition of the WLA. This will make the area less appealing to visitors, especially repeat visitors, so there may be a knock on effect on local tourism which is a significant economic activity in the vicinity.

SWLG objects on the grounds of unacceptable visual impact in, and attrition of, a WLA.

**Cumulative Impacts:** This proposed scheme will be to the immediate east of two existing hydro schemes, each with its own visually intrusive access track, so there would be a cumulative effect, with this scheme further adding to adverse visual impacts. There are already other unsightly hydro schemes in the vicinity. This is a further reason for our Objection.

**Access Track:** Such hydro schemes are associated with tracks for access during construction and maintenance. Developers claim that robust access tracks are required to enable heavy machinery to reach construction sites and that after commissioning the access tracks will be reinstated and any needed for maintenance will be restored to an acceptable standard that blends in with the surroundings. This happens very rarely and all over western Scotland such schemes are associated with permanent landscape scars with little long term effort made to mitigate visual impacts. Indeed, in this case where the construction impact may not be as great in some respects, due to the transport method to be used, the developer still wants a permanent access track – we question whether this is necessary as the only routine maintenance will be for clearing inlet pipes. We would point out that in this location, where there is an oligotrophic loch there will be little blocking of inlets by organic material; for instance, there will be no woodland/forest detritus and if the inlet is well designed and takes account of the settling patterns of suspended particles from stream

inflows, sources of detritus will be limited to minor vegetation inputs and perhaps the occasional dead animal.

In the case of hilltrack construction, it is increasingly accepted that if the original vegetation is set aside, maintained and reused for the sides and a central grass strip, and grazing prevented until the vegetation is well re-established, then some degree of concealment can be achieved, but this is only feasible in the case of a minor track just wide enough for one 4X4. The developer would need to provide details of the track construction methods to be used – not merely reiterations of the Highland Council's own excellent guidance and that of SNH. These must be site-specific and done for different points along the length of the track as the requirements will vary depending on the aspect, incline, substrate, drainage conditions and so on. Tracks and roads built on hills often result in unsightly erosion and environmental damage due to local micro site conditions not being properly assessed and addressed. We note that a significant stretch of the proposed track, just to the south west of the dam, is over very steep ground and careful consideration would need to be given to construction techniques used here in order to avoid visual impact and erosion. The developer needs to provide more information on the precise techniques to be employed throughout the length of the track.

However, despite the comments above, we consider that the permanent access track should NOT be consented and that instead, if the overall scheme is consented, the existing access track to the west to Allt a'Mheil, should be extended and used. Further to this, if alternative maintenance access via this track is a condition of consent, then it should be improved as its erosion scar is currently visually intrusive. This might of course require negotiation and shared costs with the landowner to the west, if different from the landowners of the proposed development site.

**Construction and Operational Impacts:** In the case of the substrate found in this location it would be essential to address the potential for silt contamination of water courses. SWLG have visited commissioned schemes elsewhere where silt containment and contamination avoidance techniques have been employed to no avail as they have been incorrectly built and incorporated and/or not maintained. The quality of construction and maintenance must be monitored, and we consider that if this scheme is consented that it is a CONDITION that an Ecological Clerk of Works must be appointed to conduct daily inspections to regulatory standards.

In connection with this, we are concerned about the siting of the proposed borrow pit. This is far too close to the watercourse and there is a strong likelihood that silting will result. This must be re-evaluated and a different location proposed, and relevant documentation re-submitted for consideration by the planning authority. This must include proposals for reinstating the original soil profile [by separating and conserving the layers] and vegetation [by set aside in a single layer and maintenance tending].

**Peat:** The developer has not provided adequate peat-mapping and accompanying micro-site specific construction details to demonstrate intent to avoid/effectively mitigate deep peat damage as described in Scottish Government best guidance guidelines.

**Reinstatement of Penstock Works:** SWLG has observed, in schemes elsewhere, that the maintenance of soil profiles and turves during the construction phase has rarely been

adequate to ensure successful reinstatement. In the case of this very visually intrusive and potentially damaging scheme, full and feasible details must be provided and there must be CONDITIONS set that an Ecological Clerk of Works can monitor delivery on, most especially maintenance of soil profiles.

**Economic Aspects:** We haven't assessed the economic case for this commercial development [but recognise that the construction and carbon costs would be considerable and would take some time to recover] but would point out that in SWLG opinion, the small generation output from such schemes in some locations does not justify the environmental degradation that they almost always cause. This would be unacceptable in a WLA. We are not objectors to hydro electricity generation as such and recognise the contribution large efficient plants can offer in helping to address climate change over their lifetimes, albeit that Scotland as a small nation can make a limited, but still worthwhile, difference to global warming amelioration.

Thus SWLG OBJECTS to this proposed hydro scheme on the grounds of its unacceptable attrition of a Wild Land Area and its cumulative impact in combination with existing similar visually intrusive schemes and tracks. In addition, some of the Applicant's submissions are inadequate in terms of peat damage avoidance, track construction, restoration and reinstatement, and provisions for silt containment to avoid pollution of watercourses. In order to address these concerns, should this proposal be consented despite our objections and any submitted by others, then appropriate conditions should be set by the planning authority, including the appointment of an Ecological Clerk of Works. There must also be a long term monitoring plan put in place that will evaluate visual and environmental impacts and delivery on agreed outcomes.

Should you have any queries over any points raised in this letter of Objection please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Beryl Leatherland