STIRLING BEFORE PYLONS

acting with

FRIENDS OF THE OCHILS

as a Relevant Person Group

for the purposes of the

STIRLING SESSION

of the Public Inquiry into
Scottish & Southern Energy's proposals for the
Beauly to Denny 400 KV Steel Tower Double Circuit
Overhead Electricity Transmission Line

SUMMARY PRECOGNITION of Geoffrey Sinclair

Landscape and Visual Impacts

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1 Introduction

1.1 I am Geoffrey Sinclair, principal of *Environment Information Services* since 1971. Much of my experience is related to wind power proposals: which require similar appraisal techniques.

1.2 My precognition concerns itself with the overground 400kV line proposal's visual and perceived impacts on both the landscape and on 'visual receptors' within the final section of the Beauly to Denny route as it leaves Perthshire and crosses the western end of the Ochils at the point where they form part of the landscape frame for the unique and historic location of Stirling. After crossing the A9 the replacement route first passes over the historically sensitive Sheriffmuir and then follows the existing smaller pylon line through an intricate transitional landscape to descend the south face of the Ochils above Logie, the Wallace Monument, the Airthrey Castle grounds and the eastward prospects of the city of Stirling, before threading its way between the 'eastern villages' to reach its destination at the Denny sub-station. This section of the route is acknowledged to pose particular design problems because of the character of the landscape, its historical and cultural provenance, and the number and sensitivity of a wide range of receptors. However, while the problems arise primarily because of the lack of flexibility as the route terminous is neared, they persist because of the decision not to elect for an underground route south of Braco and west of Stirling – a matter which lies beyond the scope of this precognition

1.3 I conclude that impacts will be significantly greater than suggested in the ES and that moreover this sub-section is the most inflexible and vulnerable part of the whole route, in terms of both landscape and local receptors. It is therefore unsurprising that the proposal has created a high level of critical response from the neighbourhood and elsewhere.

2 The proposal and its analysis in the Environmental Statement

2.1 Despite an overall reduction in numbers the proposed pylons move into a new league of visual significance because of their volumetric visual escalation and proportionate increase in visibility above any intervening trees or houses.

2.2 Many viewpoints reveal an accumulation of presentational, compositional and locational faults that serve to distort and diminish the predicted effects. A particular fault is the use of unduly small photographs, way below SNH advisory practice, thus requiring the viewer either to squint uncomfortably or risk perceiving the landscapes and pylons as unnaturally small. The existing pylons are in any case very difficult to see on many photographs.

2.3 I produce a sequence of 15 non-professional but explicit photographs illustrating the existing line in the key section from the face of the Ochils to Sheriffmuir. They are taken from positions familiar to users of the Ochils but largely ignored by the ES.

3 Visual effects experienced by receptors

3.1 Even allowing for differences in approach and definition, some of the assessments made in the ES are inconsistent and difficult to understand. The individual findings for each viewpoint reveal a lack of flexibility and fine tuning.

3.2 Despite being an incremental judgement of impacts over and above those from the existing pylon line, **magnitude** is assessed on a restrictive and contradictory basis as examples from the assessment readily reveal.

3.3 **Visual receptor sensitivity** is also evaluated on an inconsistent basis deriving from the lack of a mechanism to refine the High category or to introduce transitional categories.

3.4 In determining the **significance of effects** the ES makes inconsistent and irrational judgements tending to further down-grade the effects described.

3.5 The crudity of the ES methodology coupled with a lack of flexibility in analysis results in a finding that 25 of the 31 relevant views are classed as Minor, and the remaining 6 as only Moderate.

3.6 I conclude that there is greater variation in both magnitude and sensitivity than recognised in the ES analysis with only 1 viewpoint having a Minor significance, while at the other end of the spectrum 6 are Moderate/Major or above – 2 actually being Major. In addition I illustrate 7 further locations, of which 5 have effects above Moderate/Major significance.

3.7 Otherwise I would agree with the generalised assessments in the ES of Moderate adverse effects on four settlements and their implications for individual properties, roads, the rail line and rights of way in the wider area.

4 Landscape effects

4.1 The Ochils AGLV is the only designated landscape directly affected by the proposed line at any point in its course. The ES appears to regard the presence of the existing pylon line as rendering the AGLV insensitive to the introduction of the proposed larger pylons.

4.2 The ES uses a sequence of ZVI maps to assess the potential for cumulative effects in conjunction with 23 windfarms along the whole of the route. When its material is updated it is apparent that the there is a concentration of potential impact on this section, with the most extensive and closest impacts from the recently completed installation at Braes o' Doune.

5 Assessing Significance and reaching a conclusion

5.1 I use and commend to the Reporters a more flexible system than conventionally used to assess significant effects. As well as adopting a more liberal approach to classifying Magnitude and Sensitivity as explained above, this also attempts to give 'near-significant' effects an appropriate, though diminishing, role in the final assessment, and suitably increased weight to those well above the level.

6 Conclusions

6.1 I conclude that impacts will be significantly greater than suggested in the ES and that moreover that this section is the most inflexible and vulnerable part of the whole route, in terms of both landscape and local receptors.

6.2 An important factor accounting for the adverse landscape effects and visual impacts is the relatively small-scale and intimate nature of the landscape where the route crosses through the Ochils AGLV and descends its scarp face. It is no co-incidence that this occurs near the terminus of the line where choice is constrained by the need to take the direct route across the end of the Ochils. The consequence has been to involve a degree of landscape sensitivity and numbers of settlement nuclei not encountered elsewhere on the route

6.3 The circumstances described above justify treating this relatively short, vulnerable and deeply affected section as a special case, and one which should be anticipated to require appropriate treatment including undergrounding.

6.4 Unfortunately, the 1959 Holford Rules treat undergrounding as something even beyond a last resort, and are frankly, a product of yesteryear.

6.5 The statutory obligations under the 1989 Electricity Act balance considerations of efficiency and amenity and do not rule out undergrounding, while the principle of partial undergrounding is well established.

6.6 Given the extent of adverse landscape and visual impacts associated with the chosen route, the precedents which exist for undergrounding and the potential for removing the existing pylons from Sheriffmuir and the Ochils AGLV, then the arguments for treating this section as a special case are compelling. Such a solution to an otherwise intractable problem would demonstrate a practical application of the statutory responsibilities of SHETL and SPT, and would at the same time bring about an environmental gain for the landscape and its visual receptors, who manifestly do not want to 'receive' this development.