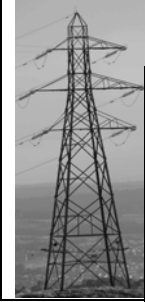


STIRLING BEFORE PYLONS

THE PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THE BEAULY-DENNY POWER LINE

Strategy Session Wk 2: 13-16 February 2007



Week 2 of the Strategy session continued with more battles royal, much as in the first week. Eight more witnesses appeared for SSE, the first four continuing to seek to establish that the proposed upgrade is needed, that it is the best available solution, and that SSE have gone about the process of developing their proposals in accord with the requirements of the Electricity Act 1989. Each witness in turn then had to face a determined barrage of questions, from the combined Councils, the Beauly – Denny Landscape Group, Highlands Before Pylons, and the Department of Trade & Industry's technical adviser to the Inquiry, as well as from others.

As in Week 1, there was a great deal of technical discussion about how much future demand there will be for electricity transmission from future wind farm developments; how often the demands will exceed the currently available capacity; whether and to what extent there is spare capacity already in the system, in the form of unused or underused existing power lines; whether the intrinsically volatile levels of electricity generated will or won't destabilise the entire grid; whether the route being proposed by SSE is in fact the best; how many additional overhead power lines would be needed, when and at what cost, if the Beauly to Denny were to be built; what other options there would be, and so on.

And as in Week 1, the lay observer can only make cautious summaries as to what was established in the course of the week. Key issues appeared to be:

- The reason why additional capacity is needed is to carry electricity that SSE expects to be generated by wind farms, in the area allocated to SHETL (Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission Ltd), i.e. northern Scotland including the Islands. The smaller increase in wind farm generation in the SPT (Scottish Power Transmission) area, in central and southern Scotland, does not really figure greatly in the equation.
- If the Beauly to Denny line were built, and if the volume of electricity generated by wind farms were to build up over coming years in the way anticipated by SSE, then in due course there would need to be major investment in further inland, potentially overhead power lines in central and southern Scotland (the SPT area). These include a major upgrade of the Scotland – England interconnector, at a price of around £425 million (to find somewhere to send the excess electricity that would be generated, at times, by the wind farms), and an upgraded route between Denny and Wishaw involving some 17 km of overhead line, at a cost of £100 - £150 million (to balance the system).
- The Denny – Wishaw line would be similar to the Beauly – Denny, double-strung at 400kV and 275kV, therefore requiring giant pylons, and carrying all the health risks associated with high-voltage overhead power lines to people living close. It would be needed by around 2015 – 2016, so SPT will be needing to start active planning of it shortly after permission were given to Beauly – Denny.

- It became apparent, again, that SSE did not seriously consider other alternatives before developing the Beaulieu – Denny proposals. Although a dozen other possible solutions were put forward by their witness on costings, he readily acknowledged that these options had only been looked at recently.
- It also became apparent, again, that SSE looked only at the engineering feasibility and the costings, before deciding to develop the Beaulieu – Denny proposals. Asked to what extent environmental considerations had been taken into account when looking at other options (such as taking the route into Kincardine instead of into Denny), the witness said it was just a “rough-cut appraisal”, with only the most “blindingly obvious” environmental constraints being taken into account – the sort that could be dealt with by the companies’ in-house staff, and not requiring inputs from any environmental consultants.
- The point was thus established that SSE’s claims of having carried out a “rigorous process” of balancing the technical, economic and environmental issues before deciding on their broad solution of an inland, overhead line between Beaulieu and Denny was really not justified.
- A later witness refused to answer questions about the remit given to the environmental consultant, when he was brought on board.
- The alternative solution of a sub-sea cable continues to be a very real if little-acknowledged option, though the costs involved are not clear at this stage. SSE have given contradictory evidence on this, indicating in one document (put into the process very late on) that a sub-sea cable could be taken down to Sunderland for an £245 million more than the Beaulieu – Denny line, or to Deeside for £80 million more than that, while in evidence it was stated that a sub-sea cable from Beaulieu to Hunterston would cost £1 billion more than the Beaulieu – Denny proposals (but these were costed at 3 times the normally quoted costs...)
- Clearly, sub-sea cables would cost more than putting an overhead line between Beaulieu and Denny, but if all the additional costs of upgrading the Scotland – England connections, and upgrading the Denny – Wishaw link are taken into account, it is not clear which would win, even on straight cost terms, let alone if all the environmental costs are taken into account. It illustrates perfectly how flawed this Public Inquiry process is, that such technical and specialist issues are being discussed without recourse to the right level of objective, impartial, high-level expertise, and underlines heavily how badly we need a Strategic Environmental Assessment to be carried out, to give the proper context for this hugely important decision.
- There was also clear illustration of some of the absurdities of the current regime for managing electricity generation and transmission. It is clear that all the supposed need for extra transmission capacity is triggered by the compensation that has to be paid (ultimately, by consumers) to wind farm operators, if they are told to shut down their turbines on the relatively rare occasions when the wind is blowing so hard in so many areas that the amount of electricity being generated would otherwise overload the system.
- It is also clear that the “best” perceived solution is, in such circumstances, to shut down conventional power generating stations such as Longannet, because their electricity is relatively cheap (£30 per megawatt hour), rather than wind farms

hundreds of miles further north, because the electricity they produce is far more costly (at £75 per megawatt hour), and they have to be given more compensation accordingly!

One can only conclude that we desperately need an intelligent, well-informed, detailed strategy for energy generation, incorporating all the implications for energy transmission, at both the UK and the Scotland level, before this convoluted process is allowed to go any further. That, however, is outwith the remit of this Inquiry, so we apparently have to continue with this painstaking, painful, immensely costly charade for just as long as it takes.

The Strategy session of the Inquiry, dealing with all the over-arching and generic issues (including the need for the line, the health issues, and the principles of undergrounding, as well as a lot of methodological issues) will continue until 11 May, Tuesday to Friday, between 10 am and 5 – 5.30pm, at the Quality Hotel, next to Perth Station. There will be a 2-week break for Easter.

Local issues will be dealt with at four local sessions, starting in Inverness, and reaching Stirling on 20 November. The Stirling session, and the entire Inquiry, will eventually reach its end on 20 December 2007.

For further details, contact Nicki Baker or Peter Pearson on 01786 833399

