

EXCLUSIVE

By Vicky Allan
Feature Writer
of the Year

RESIDENTS of Iona are opposing a 91-turbine offshore wind farm proposed for the sea near Staffa and Iona, saying that the site is "top-tier sensitivity" and a "national strategic test case", which will impact how west coast seascapes are developed.

"If this wind farm is consented, what meaningful protection will remain for Scotland's undeveloped west coast horizons or for precious heritage elsewhere," said the convenor of Iona Community Council.

The National Trust for Scotland has said it plans to object to the MachairWind development, set to cover an area more than half the land mass of Mull, which it considers poses "significant environmental, social and economic risks".

Community council convenor Shiona Ruhemann said: "If development on this scale is considered acceptable in the setting of Iona, Staffa, the Treshnish Isles and western Mull, where nothing like it exists just now – and which is a living, nationally important cultural landscape, a protected wilderness – then there's no meaningful limit on future industrialisation of the west coast seascapes, or of any other parts of Scotland."

MachairWind's turbines will cover around 450 square kilometres in an area, Ruhemann said, is "currently defined by openness, simplicity, and the absence of large-scale development".

ScottishPower Renewables, MachairWind's developer, points out that the wind farm "will deliver more clean power to the grid, strengthen the UK's energy security and help drive economic growth".

With electricity demand set to double by 2050, it could generate around 2GW of clean, green electricity – enough to power two million homes.

Competitive

ITS development area was one of 17 identified – following extensive consultation by the Scottish Government – in the government's Sectoral Marine Plan, and ScottishPower Renewables, following a competitive seabed leasing auction managed by Crown Estate Scotland for these sites, was awarded the rights in January 2022.

While no turbine technology has been chosen yet, the proposals for the wind farm currently incorporate between 91 and 144 (depending on size and capacity) turbines. The maximum blade tip height would range from 280 metres to 335m.



Left, Iona residents who are campaigning against the MachairWind development including Shiona Ruhemann

local consultation and engagement, in order to address concerns, including impact on birds.

MacDonald said: "They think that the mitigation is already done by reducing just the size of the array by about 40% from what the licence allowed to what they are planning to do, but that is just planning spin."

His other concern is the seascape, and he shared photographs of views out to the Atlantic which could be impacted by the turbines.

"The views are so important," he said. "I work out in the boat all the time, and when I look around, other than boats and houses, I can't see anything that's manmade."

"Very occasionally you'll see a lighthouse. There are unbroken horizons between islands. Iona is a separate island from Mull, but if you are out in a boat, and there's a line of turbines on the horizon that join them, then they won't look separate any more, and people have absolutely no concept of how big these things are."

'A national strategic test' Plan for 91 turbines puts the wind up residents on Iona

The tallest of these will be among the highest in the world and, if delivered, will be relatively close to land.

Ruhemann noted that Dogger Bank has the UK's current tallest turbines at 260m, and is sited 78-124 miles from land, but MachairWind's could bring 340m turbines to just 7.7 miles from Colonsay and 12.95 miles from Iona.

ScottishPower Renewables is due to submit an application to the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate seeking consent this month, after which host communities will have a month during which to support or object to it.

A survey conducted in March by Iona Community Council on whether to object to the proposal, which had returns from two-thirds of households, found that 92% objected to the development. In almost every case, those who objected stressed very strongly that they support renewables and net-zero transition.

Ruhemann said: "This is not about opposition to renewables. We've got a very, very strong track record on renewables and net zero."

The community on Iona have fought for their own community renewable energy, including a 10-year fight to get a ground-source heat network, and

another for a small turbine, neither of which have been facilitated to go ahead.

"We couldn't install a small community wind turbine, mainly because restrictions on height and visibility were so strict," said Ruhemann. "Yet those same principles disappear when the proposal is a 91-turbine offshore wind farm occupying hundreds of square kilometres of the surrounding sea."

'Fragile island'

THEIR objection to MachairWind is "largely because it would industrialise an undeveloped, nationally and internationally significant cultural and natural heritage landscape," she explained. "It would bring major uncertainty around ecological effects, for bird life and sea mammals, and expose us, as a fragile island community, to risks that aren't even being assessed."

"Our economy, our sustainability, Iona's international reputation – all of those are inseparable from the landscape and seascape setting. The impacts on these islands would be immediate, direct and irreversible, whereas the benefits are distant, indirect, unconvincing, and unspecified."

"The international significance of this area comes



Above, how the planned Berwick Bank wind farm may look

from a relationship between the island, the surrounding ocean, and the wider Atlantic horizon. The sea is not merely the setting for that heritage – it's an integral part of the heritage that needs to be protected."

Finlay MacDonald, who skips boat trips for Staffa Tours, said that one of his biggest concerns was for the birds.

"When you read reports about Berwick Bank wind farm on the east coast, and the devastation to birds that could cause, it's similar over here, where we have important bird populations, but it is just a different side of the country."

"We have a lot of people come here specifically to see corncrakes and they will fly right through the array. I spoke to an expert from Cambridge University, who told me that is their route, at between 50m and 150m high."

ScottishPower Renewables has already reduced the size of the plan by 40%, down from 754km² to 448km², following

St Columba

THERE is also, he said, the island's cultural heritage to consider. "Iona has a massive religious significance to the world. St Columba arrived from Ireland, crossed in a coracle via Colonsay – going right through where they are talking about putting an array – came to Iona, climbed up a hill, could not see Ireland, and the rest is history."

"There will be people who go to that hill for religious reasons or spiritual reasons and they are going to be sitting looking at an industrial skyline. It is just beyond comprehension to me."

He added: "We're very lucky in some ways that when oil was never struck here, I think if oil was struck here in the 1960s and 70s, the seascape would already be industrialised."

The east coast... it is riddled with wind farms, because infrastructure is there, because it's already been industrialised.

"Our unique selling point on the west coast is the fact that it's not industrialised, and a lot of people build businesses and their lives around that because tourism is the major driver of Iona."

For Ruhemann, this is not just about the effects of MachairWind itself. "It's the precedent it establishes for future management of Scotland's most valued environments and assets. What do any of these designations mean, what is nationally important cultural and natural heritage worth?"

"The issue isn't only whether these turbines would be seen –

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“This is not about opposition to renewables. We've got a strong track record on renewables



Left, one of the views out to the Atlantic that could be impacted by Machair Wind turbines

Picture:
Finlay
MacDonald

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these turbines would be seen which they definitely would be – but that they would completely change the character of one of Europe's most celebrated Atlantic seascapes, transforming it into an industrialised horizon."

The development, she claimed, did not "meet with the requirements of National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), the National Marine Plan and associated environmental legislation". "These make it clear that renewable energy development must be delivered in a way that protects nationally important landscapes, cultural heritage, biodiversity, and communities. MachairWind fails those tests."

She noted: "NPF4 is clear that development affecting a National Scenic Area (NSA) should only proceed where the area's integrity is not compromised, or where any harm is clearly outweighed by social, environmental or economic benefits of national importance. MachairWind fails that test too."

At the heart of that National Scenic Area is Staffa, famous for its basalt columns and Fingal's Cave, which she describes as "an internationally recognised visitor destination, celebrated for its natural and geological qualities and experienced through views of sea and horizon".

She points out: "If you look out from Staffa towards Iona and its hugely important southern outlook, there will be a horizon of turbines that completely changes the character and integrity of Staffa and the NSA."

"Our position," she added, "is that MachairWind would cause really significant harm to the setting and the special qualities of the National Scenic Area, but there's no location-specific national benefit demonstrated to counter that harm."

Sent to Wales

NONE of the electricity generated, she added, would be distributed to the island communities described as "host communities". Some would be sent to Wales.

"The developer, ScottishPower Renewables, confirmed to us that the energy would go to around Kilmarnock and Wales. Scotland and Wales are already net exporters of electricity. Given that Scotland already exports large amounts of renewable electricity, how is industrialising nationally important

seascapes and island landscapes a proportionate way to deliver additional generation?"

A National Trust for Scotland spokesperson said: "The National Trust for Scotland supports the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, needed to both address climate change and to help restore nature. However, we are concerned that the location and scale of the proposed MachairWind wind farm development will cause unacceptable environmental damage."

"In particular, we are concerned by the anticipated impact on marine life, bird life, and on landscapes and seascapes. We consider that these pose significant environmental, social and economic risks. Given these concerns, we intend to object to the proposed development."

ScottishPower Renewables has carried out extensive engagement and consultation with the island communities on Islay, Jura, Colonsay, Ross of Mull, and Iona, as well as many other individuals and organisations including other sea users and the agencies responsible for Scotland's nature and cultural heritage.

'Engaging'

A SPOKESPERSON for ScottishPower Renewables said: "We've met with and listened to our many host island communities, including Iona, extensively over a number of years, as well as engaging with key statutory bodies like NatureScot and Historic Environment Scotland as we progress plans for MachairWind."

"We fully recognise the environmental and cultural importance of these islands and their seascapes. We believe an offshore wind farm can be sensitively sited here and have made changes to our project in response to community feedback to ensure that can be achieved. We've also carried out comprehensive environmental assessments to ensure the project meets the rigorous standards required by the planning process and are committed to measures that will deliver positive outcomes for nature."

"MachairWind will deliver more clean power to the grid, strengthen the UK's energy security and help drive economic growth. We remain committed to working with local communities to realise these benefits for the islands, wider Argyll and Bute region, and Scotland."