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A SCOTTISH PERSPEC

Offshore wind site should be protected area, says NatureScot

Vicky Allan

ONE of the world's biggest planned offshore wind farms is on a site in Scottish waters that the Scottish Government's own agency has said would classify as a specially protected area "in its own right".

"The impacts predicted for this site are an order of magnitude greater, and across more species than we have seen for any other offshore wind farm application in Scotland," said NatureScot in a consultation document in 2023.

The document, which was recently unearthed by RSPB Scotland, is one of a number of representations by a range of bodies to Marine Scotland during its consultation for offshore consent for Berwick Bank wind farm off East Lothian, the world's largest single consented offshore wind farm by generating capacity. It was sent in March 2023.

RSPB Scotland, which has claimed the wind farm, set to be one of the largest in the world on completion, will be "the deadliest wind farm for birds", said that the revelation backed the case that the site should not have been given consent.

The NatureScot submission stressed the ornithological significance of "the proposed development area", pointing out that "figures for kittiwake, guillemot, gannet and razorbill meet the thresholds of either 1% of the relevant biogeographic population or 20,000 individuals for breeding and non-breeding season".

"The area would qualify for SPA designation for these species in its own right, and combined with the neighbouring Outer Firth of Forth and St Andrews Bay Complex SPA, would also qualify under breeding assemblage," it said.

RSPB also points out there were other options which would have had less impact on nature. "As an

illustration of just how much less damaging floating wind could be, developers submitted a proposal for a floating offshore wind farm called Ossian to the Scottish Government last year," said Aedan Smith, head of policy and advocacy at RSPB Scotland.

"Ossian would be just a little further offshore than Berwick Bank, in the same general area of the North Sea. It would generate almost as much electricity as Berwick Bank (3.6GW v 4.1GW). But while it would still have some impacts, Ossian would not be as devastating as Berwick Bank."

RSPB Scotland notes that Ossian and other wind farms are estimated to reduce the kittiwake population of St Abb's Head alone by up to 13%.

"This is a worryingly large number,

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The transition to renewable energy must be done responsibly

and significant work would be needed to help populations recover," Mr Smith said. "But add in Berwick Bank and the two projects together would completely devastate the population at St Abb's by a shocking 81%. That could fast-track kittiwakes towards extinction."

Berwick Bank, he observed, is "only 14% bigger but has twice the impact on seabirds as Ossian".

Stop Berwick Bank, a growing coalition of campaigners against the wind farm, also voiced concern over the impact on bird populations.

"NatureScot described the impacts of Berwick Bank as 'an order of magnitude greater than any other offshore wind project in Scotland', said Angela Paterson, spokesperson for the campaign.

"Those are not the words of campaigners, they are the words of the Scottish Government's own nature conservation experts.

"What has changed since then? Why has that advice been set aside? The public have a right to know. If anything, the case for protecting vulnerable seabird species such as kittiwakes, which are red-listed and continuing to decline, is even stronger today than it was in 2023.

"The transition to renewable energy is essential, but it must be done responsibly – and not at the expense of environmental safeguards that exist to protect some of Scotland's wildlife."

A spokesperson for SSE said: "Berwick Bank is a vital offshore wind project for Scotland and the UK's energy security, moving us away from volatile global energy markets to homegrown power while helping safeguard nature for the long term by mitigating climate change, which is the single biggest driver of negative change in seabird populations in UK and Scottish waters.

"The project has been sensitively designed and shaped by robust environmental research and site-specific data."

The 4.1GW Berwick Bank Offshore Wind Farm is set to have the capability to power more than six million homes every year and play a role in tackling climate change, which according to OSPAR, is considered "the main cause of the continuing declines in the status of marine birds in the north-east Atlantic".

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: "We recognise that the area is highly important for wildlife which is why the wind farm is subject to the developer, SSE Renewables, producing a detailed sea bird compensation plan, for approval by Scottish ministers, before any construction or operational activity can begin."

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