

ICC Brief

Proposed MachairWind Offshore Wind Farm

Updated brief, Iona Community Council, May 2026 (v.2.2)

MachairWind is a proposed offshore wind farm south of Iona covering an area equivalent to more than half the landmass of Mull. It comprises 91 x 340 meter tall turbines, which would be among the tallest currently operational in the world, and – compared to other vast turbines – would be sited close to land (12.95 miles from Iona, 12.43 miles from Mull).

In June 2026, ScottishPower Renewables will submit an application to the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate seeking consent for MachairWind to proceed. Iona Community Council consulted with the island community in March on whether to object to the proposal. The outcome was:

From ~two-thirds (64%) of households –

- Object to MachairWind = 92%
- 'No objection to objecting' = 5%
- Support MachairWind proposal = 3%

In almost every case, those who object **stressed very strongly that they support renewables and net zero transition**, and went to considerable effort to explain their reasoning.

Please note the Endnote on images methodology

Context

Island communities – described by the developer as “host communities” – will have **~30 days to support or object** to SPR's planning application once it is published around the end of June.



From Iona Abbey grounds showing turbines behind Relig Odrain

Despite nearly two years of interaction with the developer, it has been difficult to obtain a clear picture of the project's **scale, impacts, costs and benefits**.

For example, there is currently only **one photomontage from Iona**, which we expect is taken with standard methodology, but it is widely recognised that such photomontages present turbines as smaller than they will be in reality.

This briefing summarises what we have been able to establish.

The Proposal

MachairWind is proposed as a **2 GW wind farm** owned by Iberdrola (Spanish multinational) through ScottishPower Renewables (SPR).

The development would cover an area equivalent to **around 51% of the landmass of Mull**.

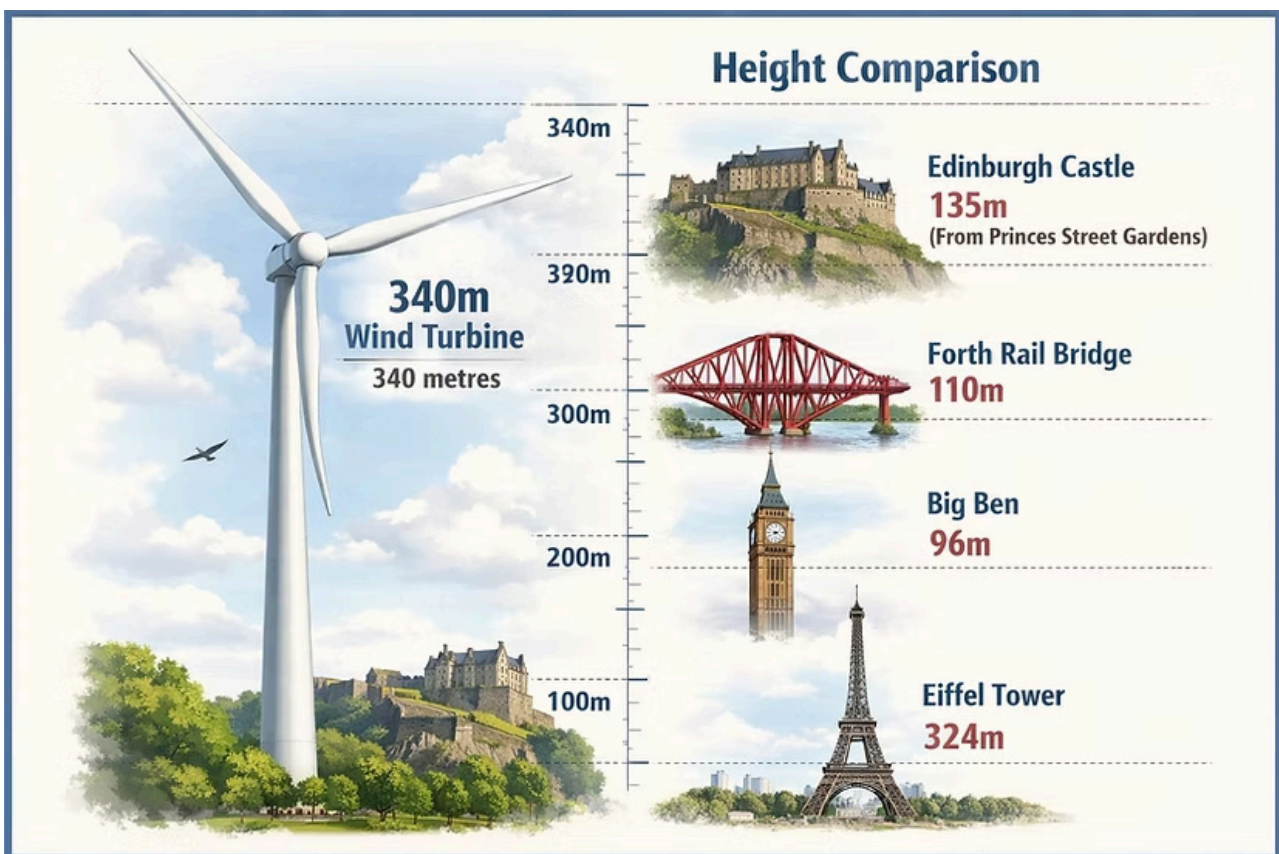
The turbines proposed are exceptionally large:

- **91 turbines that are 340 metres high to blade tip**
- **Or 147 turbines at 260 metres high**

MachairWind turbines would be among the tallest in the world (tallest currently = DEC 26MW at 340-350 m) and relatively close to land for that scale of turbine:

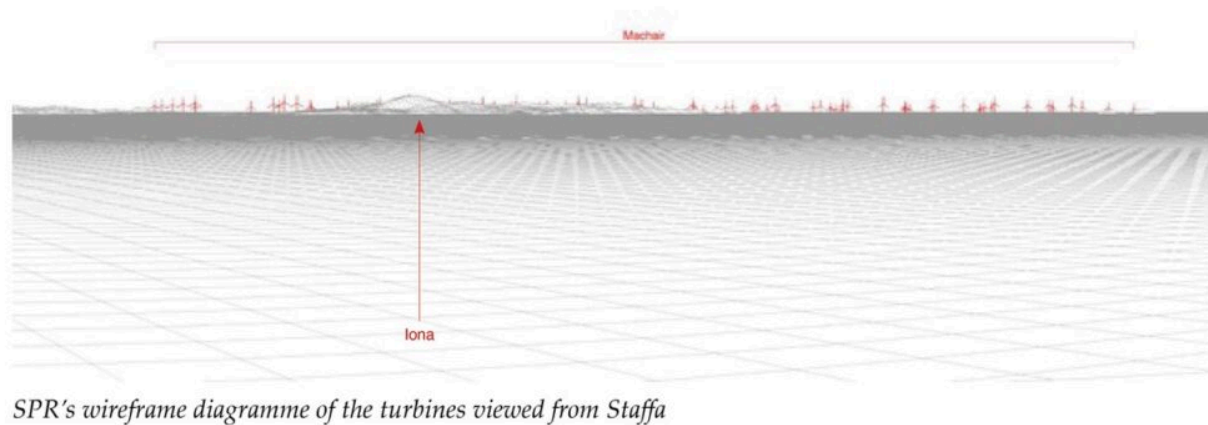
- Dogger Bank wind farm (partially installed since 2025) has the UK's current tallest turbines at 260 m, sited 78-124 miles from land
- MachairWind's 340 m turbines will be 7.7 miles from Colonsay and 12.95 miles from Iona – therefore very close to a 'nearshore' (~0-6 miles) rather than 'offshore' development

For comparison, the MachairWind turbines would be taller than any building in Europe excluding Russia. A 340 m turbine is **higher than the Eiffel Tower (324 m)** – and almost exactly equivalent to Big Ben (96 m) on top of the Forth Road Bridge (110 m) on top of Edinburgh Castle (135 m) (total 341 m).



From Iona looking south, turbines would extend across the horizon from Colonsay in the east and beyond Iona's machair to the west.

From Staffa they would be visible above the skyline of Dun I.



Where Would the Power Go?

Electricity from the wind farm would be exported by **subsea cable to a grid connection in South Ayrshire**, then distributed north towards Kilmarnock and south to Wales.

No electricity would be distributed to the island communities described as “host communities”.

So, according to SPR, MachairWind would be built to power Wales, yet Wales is already a net exporter of electricity, generating nearly twice as much as it can consume annually.

Scotland is also generating more electricity than it can consume, with wind farms being paid not to produce electricity (e.g. Seagreen, Scotland largest offshore wind farm, was paid ~£65 million to constrain its output by 71% in 2024, with reportedly similar constraint payment in 2025).

In May, the Herald reported a “global energy boss” declaring it's senseless for more wind farms to be developed in Scotland, as Scotland is over-producing power that it cannot consume, 68% of the energy generated is being discarded, with the taxpayer paying £2 billion per year for wind farms to turn off their turbines.

Yet the Scottish Government keeps offering sites to private companies for development

(Campaigners react to admission that building more wind farms makes no sense – The Herald, 9 May 2026).

SPR has confirmed the project's financial viability would also depend on a **UK government grant funded by taxpayers.**

Why Was This Site Chosen?

The site was one of ~20 identified in the Scottish Government's **Sectoral Marine Plan for Offshore Wind (2020).**

SPR "competitively tendered" against other developers for this site because **"its prospects were good regarding development potential".**

This contrasts with Iona's planning restrictions, where development is tightly controlled to protect the landscape. For example:

- the social housing development was required to remain below skyline level
- earlier feasibility work on **small community wind turbines for Iona** was not viable mainly as restrictions on height and visibility were so strict

From what we have been told, **site selection was based on ease of development**; we're unaware of any consideration of harmful impact to nearby island communities (SPR: "That's for you to tell us").

Socio-economic Assessment (Tourism)

The developer has confirmed that its socio-economic assessment will not include any input from Iona residents, businesses or visitors (email from SPR).

Instead, the research consultant intends to assess tourism impacts by analysing **changes in tourism employment near existing wind farms elsewhere; and possibly integrate some ecological results from other research** (e.g. changes to species the consultant deems relevant to tourism).

Because Iona is a small island economy, the consultant considers it **too small a sample size – meaning the consultant doesn't know the methods to research a community like Iona's.**

This methodology will not produce valid results and is unable to capture the impacts on tourism or such factors as:

- the dependence of Iona's economy on landscape quality
- the perception-based nature of pilgrimage and visitor tourism
- the limited economic diversification of a small island community.



From the Village Hall: the historic view from the Road of the Dead via Martyr's Bay to the south

Community Benefit

Community benefit from offshore wind developments is **voluntary rather than mandatory** (email from SPR Head of Development, 07.07.25).

Regarding a 'Community Benefit Fund', ScottishPower Renewables has stated that it cannot give any indication of community benefit levels before consent is granted or before Scottish Government offshore guidelines are produced – but has confirmed it will certainly not be on the scale of £5000/MW for onshore wind because offshore wind has much finer margins due to higher installation, maintenance, and decommissioning costs.

Beyond any unspecified Community Benefit Fund, current indications from SPR of any benefit to the community from MachairWind include:

- a Small Donations Fund offering up to **£500 grants**
 - **five apprenticeships** across **Argyll and Bute**
 - a proposed **£500,000 capacity fund** across the 25 year lifespan of the project = **£20,000 per year across the entire council area**.
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Planning Issues Relevant to Iona

When deciding whether to grant consent, material planning considerations include:

- environmental and ecological impacts
- landscape and visual impacts
- navigation and fisheries
- socio-economic effects.

Experience from wind-farm decisions suggests that objections are most successful where:

- **habitats regulations tests are not met**
- **bird mortality risks are excessive**
- **landscape impacts are judged nationally significant**

Ecological concerns are being examined by specialist organisations, for instance regarding seabirds in nearby internationally important colonies such as the Treshnish Isles Special Protection Area. We have been advised that RSPB will object to the proposal.

Landscape Impacts

A key planning question is whether the proposal would **fundamentally change the character of Iona's Atlantic landscape setting**.

Under National Planning Framework 4 renewable energy development is supported, but only where it does not cause unacceptable impacts on nationally important landscapes or heritage.

Sensitivity of the Landscape

Iona's seascape has **high to very high landscape sensitivity**.

Its defining characteristic is the open **Atlantic horizon with little or no industrial infrastructure**. Many important viewpoints—including the machair, the Sound of Iona, elevated ground and historic religious sites—look directly across this horizon.

Potential Change

A development of this scale would introduce:

- large vertical structures across a wide arc
- a repetitive engineered skyline
- aviation lighting visible at night in a dark-sky environment

In landscape-assessment terms this could lead to:

- **major adverse landscape effects**
- **a fundamental change to the character of Iona's seascape**

Even at distance, turbines can create strong visual contrast in open seascapes where the horizon is otherwise uninterrupted. Significance is likely to derive from change of character, not only proximity.

National Importance of the Landscape

The significance of potential impacts is increased by nearby designations such as the Loch Na Keal National Scenic Area on Mull, Scotland's highest landscape designation.

Iona's historic monuments – including the Abbey and Nunnery – also mean that the surrounding seascape forms part of a nationally important **cultural landscape setting**.

Landscape studies such as the Argyll and the Firth of Clyde Landscape Character Assessment describe this region as an exposed Atlantic island landscape **highly sensitive to large structures**.

Taken together, these factors mean the proposal could reasonably be argued to cause:

- **major adverse landscape effects**
- **significant visual impacts from key viewpoints**
- **a nationally significant change in landscape character**



From the rear gate of Iona Abbey

SPR has produced one single photomontage so far from Iona (Dun I). While SPR's photomontages are expected to accord with standard panoramic visualisation practice, **it is recognised that this standard method often understates perceived scale and visual prominence**, including the new generation of very large scale turbines.

Four of the images in this note are generated for ICC from significant viewpoints, to approximate a human-eye perspective, based on available project parameters with careful and transparent methodology, and technical comments welcomed from SPR or other parties:

Images 1, 4, 5 – used following technical advice from a landscape architect and confirmation that using a 50mm focal length on a full-frame sensor is a standardised NatureScot method for fixed point photography.

New full frame images taken with a lens recommended for portrayal of what the human eye sees (50mm), creating an overlay based on: co-ordinates for the outer limits of the MachairWind polygon (supplied by SPR on request, individual turbine coordinates not supplied), height and number of turbines, coordinates and elevation of the viewpoint, bearing of the centre of the photograph, and camera lens details. The AI prompt was run multiple times to solve for error and the scaling of the turbines in the images was the most consistent over time.

Image 3: SPR's wireframe diagram of the turbines viewed from Staffa, unamended (other than arrow identifying Iona).

SPR images, including the one from Iona, are illustrative visualisations. The images generated for ICC are illustrative visualisations. In the absence of confirmed turbine coordinates, they should be regarded as indicative rather than predictive.

The limitations of both approaches highlight the need for the Environmental Impact Assessment to include visualisations prepared in line with NatureScot guidance, including appropriately scaled and verified 50mm (or equivalent) full frame views, to enable a more accurate assessment of effects on landscape, seascape and the setting of heritage assets.



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