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Highland Council planning reference: 21/01615/FUL
Sent by email: eplanning@highland.gov.uk

18 May 2021

Dear Ms Farmer,

Objection: Sallachy Wind Farm

It is with regret that we note our objection to the proposed Sallachy wind farm.

We are a conservation charity that supports the Scottish Government's net zero emissions target. We also support the continued protection of Scotland's wild land as a finite national asset that contributes to the health and wellbeing of present and future generations. We are objecting to this application principally because of the direct harm it would have on the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area but also because of the direct impacts the proposal would have on priority peatland habitats. As a natural store of carbon, these habitats are of growing national importance in Scotland's contribution to the global effort to halt the pace of climate change. This development is also relevant to our work as land managers of Quinag. A distinctive, iconic mountain within the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area, Quinag is visible on a clear day from the summit plateau above the slopes where the proposed development would be sited. From the viewpoint images submitted with the application we note the proposed development would also be visible from Quinag (Viewpoint 22, Figure 6.36 and Figure 6.59).

As part of our work towards protecting wild places, we assess impacts that development of all kinds may have on Scotland's wild land. In doing so we represent our 12,000 members and the wider community of people who value wild land. Wild land has a high level of public support in Scotland. According to NatureScot's 2019 public perceptions of landscape survey, *'Scotland's landscapes and areas of wild land continue to be highly valued by the public: 82% of respondents in 2019 agreed that Scotland's landscapes make an important contribution to the economy and 83% agreed that the country's areas of wild land should be protected'*. This public support for wild land is reflected in individual comments in response to this application. Individuals objecting to the proposal reference the role of wild land in supporting human health and wellbeing, rare wildlife, Scottish tourism, and outdoor recreation (Wild Land Areas contain 269 out of 282 Munros and 177 out of 222 Corbetts

making them popular destinations in their own right for individuals and groups seeking outdoor adventure and activity). The Highland Tourism Action Plan 2020, referenced in Chapter 13 of the EIA (socio-economic and recreation), identified ‘*activities and adventure*’, ‘*business tourism*’, ‘*sailing*’ and ‘*mountain biking*’ as four of the six growth opportunities for tourism in the Highlands. Wild Land Areas, as areas where people can experience adventure and freedom, play a part in sustaining the growth of each of these activities and will contribute to the future success of tourism in the Highlands if valued as natural assets.

We are aware that this proposal has the support of Lairg Community Council and that six community councils of Central and North West Sutherland have signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Shared Ownership. The Memorandum of Understanding for Shared Ownership and the commitment to create a community benefit fund are both examples of the developer following the Scottish Government’s Good Practice Principles. This is to be commended. We understand the need for investment in local services in remote rural communities and that both shared ownership and a community benefit fund would be a way to fund local services. However, whilst a consideration for the communities in deciding whether to support the proposal, these financial benefits are not supposed to have any bearing on the Highland Planning Committee’s determination of this application. Scottish Government Good Practice Principles guidance is clear ‘*If the development is to receive planning permission, it should be acceptable in planning terms and without taking into consideration the shared ownership element*’. The same is true for community benefit funds. The relevant guidance clearly states, ‘*The provision of community benefits (including flexible packages of benefits) is not a material consideration, and has no bearing in the planning process*’.

We understand that this development would provide income for the Sallachy estate, helping the estate to sustain revenue in the short to mid-term future and secure local jobs. Whilst this context explains why the development has been brought forward and counts as a benefit, it does not, in our submission, justify the significant harm the proposed nine turbine development would have on wild land. There are alternative income generating options available for landowners and managers to manage wild land sustainably. With extensive peatland, the Sallachy estate could benefit from peatland action funding for a long-term restoration programme. Woodland and peatland carbon credits could also provide the estate with a sustainable source of income.

On Monday 10 May 2021, staff and Trustees of the John Muir Trust walked the whole site with permission and thanks to Iain Thomson for enabling us to do so. We benefitted from a clear day, which made it obvious that on a day with good visibility, the proposed development would be visible from the major peaks in all directions as well as to people travelling along Loch Shin on the A838. With this in mind, we support Mountaineering Scotland’s assessment of the landscape and visual impacts this development would have.

Specific points of objection

1. As a finite national asset this area of wild land was deemed worthy of protection in the decision of Scottish Ministers in 2015 refusing consent for a wind farm on the Sallachy estate. Scottish Ministers concluded then that the main determining issues included impacts on wild land and the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area. They cited paragraphs 215, 161 and 200 of Scottish Planning Policy with respect to wild land and concluded the adverse impacts and national harm outweighed any benefits. Given Scottish National Planning Policy

remains unchanged since that earlier decision, the National Planning Policy basis for refusing the current application also remains unchanged.

2. By contrast, the renewable energy policy context has changed dramatically since the 2015 refusal. This is due to the rate at which onshore wind development has expanded across the Highland region as well as elsewhere in Scotland in recent years. Statistics provided by Scottish Renewables chart the rapid growth in total installed capacity of renewable energy from 2009 to 2020. The greatest share of capacity growth has come from onshore wind. According to the Scottish Government, 97 per cent of all electricity in Scotland is now generated by renewables. With 8.5 GW of installed onshore wind capacity, a further 4.5 GW already consented and an additional 4 GW in planning we have no shortage of renewable electricity capacity in Scotland. When other renewables are included (offshore wind, hydro, solar) that figure for projects that are either consented or in the planning pipeline rises to 14 GW – potentially enough to supply every household in Scotland with electricity four times over. This development, at nine turbines at a height of 149.9m, would add little extra to the overall balance of Scotland’s renewable electricity capacity yet it would undermine our most important natural carbon store (peat), put at risk the future of a Wild Land Area and remains contrary to Scottish Planning Policy.
3. Scottish Planning Policy defines Wild Land Areas as ‘*areas of significant protection*’ where development should only proceed if ‘*any significant effects on the qualities of these areas can be substantially overcome by siting, design or other mitigation*’ (paragraphs 215 and 166). To date, this policy has been applied in the interests of protecting wild land, with only one wind farm development approved that has some turbines in a Wild Land Area. The Highland Council’s Onshore Wind Supplementary Guidance (2016) adopts the wording of Scottish Planning Policy, providing even more clarity by including a presumption against supporting onshore wind in Wild Land Areas: ‘*Wind energy developments within mapped areas of wild land are unlikely to be supported unless it can be demonstrated that significant effects on the qualities of these areas can be substantially overcome by siting, design and other mitigation.*’ The proposed development goes against the Highland Council’s Onshore Wind Supplementary Guidance and undermines the Scottish Government’s policy to protect Wild Land Areas from industrialisation.
4. Paragraph 215 of Scottish Planning Policy places the burden on the developer to demonstrate, for any onshore wind development proposed in a Wild Land Area, that any significant effects can be overcome by ‘*siting, design or other mitigation*’. The development proposed has been reduced to nine turbines with a smaller footprint than earlier iterations. However, the turbines are bigger than the previous application, which proposed turbines with blade to tip height of 125m. Being taller, at 149.9m, the extent of their visibility would be greater than what was previously proposed and subsequently refused. At the proposed height, each one would be considerably out of proportion with the existing, predominantly wild, natural landscape features. Arranged on a similar elevation to the 125m turbines of the original Sallachy application, they would be an even more prominent feature in the landscape than the turbines that were refused consent.

5. The turbines and most of the associated infrastructure for the proposed development are all in the Wild Land Area. In addition to the turbines and their foundations, 8.9km of existing track would need to be widened and bridges reinforced; there would be an additional 7km of new access track linking the existing track and each turbine; a new substation; a construction compound; underground cabling; a borrow pit and 48 new watercourse crossings (Chapter 4 of the EIA, Project Description). National Planning Policy does not differentiate between parts of a Wild Land Area that may have more or less capacity for development. It recognises, instead, that Wild Land Areas have *'have little or no capacity to accept new development'* (Scottish Planning Policy, paragraph 200). The location of the proposed development, towards the edge of the south eastern part of the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area, with all turbines and most infrastructure within the Wild Land Area, does not justify nor mitigate the harm it would have on the Wild Land Area. The foreseen significant effects (points 6-8 below) on the wild land qualities have not, therefore, been overcome by siting. On design, the turbines are higher than the earlier application and proposed in linear formation. An increase in height is the opposite of a mitigation or attempt to overcome significant effects. A linear formation is arguably at odds with the non-linear contours of the landform. Designing to overcome significant effects on the non-linear qualities and *'openness and high exposure'* (NatureScot's Reay-Cassley WLA description) of the surrounding landform, at the proposed scale, whilst being sited on slopes which are characterised by water pools and streams, is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.
6. On a recent site visit it was apparent that the south eastern part of the Wild Land Area expresses all the hallmarks of wild land. Part way up the slopes above Loch Shin it soon feels remote, despite being near the Wild Land Area's boundary where there is evidence of human influence outside the Wild Land Area. This sense of remoteness and perceived naturalness co-existing in this part of the Wild Land Area with human influences is communicated in the Wild Land Area's description *'Where human elements are located within the margins of the Reay-Cassley WLA, small or low-lying elements tend to have limited visibility due to screening by the landform. This means, when walking into the Reay-Cassley WLA, human elements around the edges can be lost from view after just a short distance, resulting in a perception of remoteness and sanctuary in locations that are not physically very remote'*. Once on the summit plateau above the proposed site, signs of contemporary land uses fade and, on a clear day, it is possible to see uninterrupted views towards distinctive well known mountains north, south, east, and west. These uninterrupted lines of sight, as well as the naturalness of the immediate surroundings, add to the overall sense of entering a vast, wild, mountainous landscape. Looking west this is particularly striking, as the hilltops roll towards Ben More Assynt and the Coigach Assynt National Scenic Area.
7. The proposed turbines would introduce a contemporary land use into the Wild Land Area where currently the qualities of the area are predominantly natural. The turbines would be at an elevation of about 300m (Figure 3.7) which means they would stand taller than the summit plateau above (land immediately above the turbines rises to about 400m) (Figure 3.7). The result would be a loss of the sense of wildness that can currently be experienced from the plateau above Loch Shin with peat bog underfoot and open vistas all around. The presence and rotation of the nearby turbines would distort the sense of peace, introduce

human influences where previously these were at a distance, outside the Wild Land Area. In this respect, given the sensitive location and considerable scale of the proposals, we have concluded that the visual and landscape impacts have not been overcome by siting and, given the proposed height and number of the turbines, nor have they been overcome by design.

8. The siting of this development on the *'simple peatland slopes'* of the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area means very little by way of design can be done to substantially overcome the direct harm to the specific Wild Land Qualities associated with this part of the Wild Land Area – namely, the *'Extensive, elevated peatland slopes whose simplicity and openness contribute to a perception of awe, whilst highlighting the qualities of adjacent mountains'* (Wild Land Quality 4 in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment) and the *'perceived naturalness, as well as a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude'* of the Wild Land Area (Wild Land Quality 3 in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment). Both Wild Land Qualities would be directly impacted by the scale of the proposed development. The Landscape Visual Impact Assessment concludes there will be a *'significant effect on WLQ4'*. The assessment considers the *'effect will be localised, arising only on the site itself and intermittently on the eastern leg of the peatland slopes that are associated with WLQ4.'* However, given the wild land qualities associated with the peatland are local to the south eastern part of the Wild Land Area it is no less significant that these effects are localised. It is arguably more significant because the expression of these qualities is not as strong in any other part of the Wild Land Area. Overcoming the direct significant impacts on both Wild Land Qualities 3 and 4 would require siting the development outside the Wild Land Area, not within it.
9. In addition to significant localised effects on Wild Land Quality 4 of the Reay-Cassley WLA, the Landscape Visual Impact Assessment concludes that the development would also have localised significant effects on two of the Special Landscape Qualities (SLQ) of the Coigach Assynt National Scenic Area (NSA). These two qualities - *'significant tracts of wild land'* and *'a still, quiet landscape under a constantly changing sky'* - are closely associated with the wildness of the NSA and the surrounding landscape. These qualities also relate to the part of the NSA closest to the proposed development illustrating landscape connectivity between the NSA and the Wild Land Area. According to Scottish Planning Policy (paragraph 212), development that affects a NSA should only be permitted where *'any significant adverse effects on the qualities for which the area has been designated are clearly outweighed by social, environmental or economic benefits of national importance.'* Viewpoint 2 (Figure 6.16 and Figure 6.39) shows all nine turbines as clearly visible from Ben More Assynt. This supports the conclusion that there will be significant adverse effects on the Special Landscape Qualities associated with wildness as a result of the impression of *'significant tracts of wild land'* being compromised in views south east from the NSA.
10. The Applicant has listed the benefits of the proposed development in the Non-Technical summary. These can be further summarised as community financial benefit, local services benefit through non-domestic rate payments, regional job creation, electricity for UK households and carbon dioxide emission savings. Whilst these are all quantified benefits of regional, local and UK importance (in terms of a UK market for electricity), they are less

clearly of national importance. This seems especially the case given Scotland's renewable electricity target has very nearly been met and could yet be met through development already consented, to be repowered or extended. The expected growth in offshore wind to meet ambitious UK offshore targets casts further doubt on the national importance of onshore wind to meeting future energy targets. On a much larger scale, powered by stronger winds that are more reliable, offshore turbines are more effective than onshore which means fewer turbines but more output: one offshore turbine (assuming 15MW with 58% capacity/'load factor') could easily produce six times the electricity of one of the turbines at Sallachy (assuming 5.5MW at 27% capacity/'load factor'). In the absence of evidence that significant effects are *'clearly outweighed'* by benefits of *'national importance'* the proposed development would be contrary to paragraph 212 of Scottish Planning Policy.

11. The proposed site is important nationally for its wildness, but also for its carbon sequestration value. Sited on the peatland slopes of a Wild Land Area, *'characterised by blanket bog habitats and blanket bog in transition with wet heath peatland habitats'* (Design and Access Statement, paragraph 3.2.2), it represents nationally important Class 1, as well as Class 2, peat (Figure 12.4). The role of carbon rich soils and peatland priority habitats in carbon sequestration is well evidenced. A recent report from Natural England on carbon sequestration by habitat notes *'peatland habitats hold the largest carbon stores of all habitats. When in healthy condition they sequester carbon slowly but are unique in that they can go on doing so indefinitely.'* Another recently published report, from the British Ecological Society, *'Nature Based Solutions for Climate Change in the UK'*, supports these conclusions: according to estimates, *'peatland restoration can save between two and 19 t.C/ha/yr depending on the quality the peatland is restored to.'* In addition to storing carbon, the report notes they provide other important benefits: *'highly distinctive conditions'* that enable specialised species to survive; *'comparative wilderness which can boost physical and mental wellbeing'*; natural flood management systems and reduced risk of wildfires.
12. The national importance of protecting peatland is translated into Scottish Planning Policy's spatial framework for onshore wind (Table 1, paragraph 166), which identifies *'carbon rich soils, deep peat and priority peatland habitat'* as *'areas of significant protection'*. In these areas, wind farm development is by exception; it *'may be appropriate in some circumstances'* (Table 1, paragraph 166) and should only proceed if significant impacts can be overcome by siting, design or other mitigation: *'Further consideration will be required to demonstrate that any significant effects on the qualities of these areas can be substantially overcome by siting, design or other mitigation.'* (Table 1, paragraph 166).
13. Direct and significant impacts on peat arising from the proposed development can be foreseen from Figure 7.3 which shows all turbines on blanket bog habitat - a priority peatland habitat. From the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area description, as well as up close and underfoot, the site and slopes above Loch Shin are *'a mix of lochans, bogs, peat hags, burns and rock outcrops'*. Siting the development on peatland demonstrates an absence of any precautionary approach to overcoming impacts to priority peatland habitat. The Outline Peat Management Plan notes during the construction phase the peat will be impacted in four ways – *'Loss of structural integrity and peat strength'*, *'Erosion and gullyng'*, *'contamination'*

and 'Peat slide'. Whilst the proposal intends to avoid siting turbines on deep peat and to float an estimated 3.1km of new track over deep peat, Chapter 12 of the EIA (hydrology, hydrogeology, geology) notes '*Due to the nature of peat at the site, the siting of infrastructure outwith areas of deep peat is unavoidable*'. It also acknowledges '*it has not been feasible to entirely avoid all localised instances of deeper peat*'. The Outline Peat Management Plan notes that six of the nine turbines, whilst still on peat, will avoid deep peat (defined for the purposes of the Environmental Impact Assessment as over 1m), however it is not clear whether these turbines will actually be micro sited to reduce harm. The Outline Management Plan states this '*may*' be possible, leaving open the possibility turbines will not be micro sited, foreseen impacts will not be avoided and significant impacts will not be overcome.

14. Even if the turbines are micro sited, this does not mitigate harm caused by associated infrastructure or harm to the hydrology of the overall site from disrupting the peat. Areas of deep peat are included in the list of areas to be excavated during construction with the total volume of excavated peatland estimated as 61,508.1m³ (Table 2, Outline Peat Management Plan). This amounts to peat excavation on a commercial scale, bringing major disruption to the peatland slopes, and could be considered contrary to Policy 55 of the Highland Wide Local Development Plan which states, '*New areas of commercial peat extraction will not be supported unless it can be shown that it is an area of degraded peatland which is clearly demonstrated to have been significantly damaged by human activity and has low conservation value and as a result restoration is not possible*'. Where peatland on the site is degraded, it is not beyond repair, and with low grazing pressure, could be restored to a high conservation value with funding available. The high potential conservation value of the peatland on the site is evident by the surrounding designations. 'Strath an Loin' Site of Special Scientific Interest, notable for its blanket bog and dwarf shrub species, is adjacent to the proposed development site. Other surrounding designations include the Caithness and Sutherland Peatland Special Protected Area, Special Area of Conservation and Ramsar site.

15. Policy 57 of the Highland Wide Local Development Plan states '*For features of national importance we will allow developments that can be shown not to compromise the natural environment, amenity and heritage resource. Where there may be any significant adverse effects, these must be clearly outweighed by social or economic benefits of national importance. It must also be shown that the development will support communities in fragile areas who are having difficulties in keeping their population and services.*' Policy 57 is engaged on two fronts: because the proposed development is sited on wild land - '*a nationally important asset*' under Paragraph 4.4 of National Planning Framework 3 - and because of the increased national importance of peatland in the context of climate change – a resource that is shrinking due to wind farms already sited or approved on peat and the deteriorating condition of peatlands in Scotland. With the successful decarbonisation of Scotland's energy sector to date, the social and economic importance of this development is no longer as clear as it was in 2015. The developer has arguably overstated the importance of this development and failed to factor in these changes in their carbon pay-back estimations. The 2.2 years estimated payback period in Chapter 14 of the EIA (Other Issues) is based on an out of date assumption that the UK grid comprises "fossil fuel mix". This

ignores the increasing importance of renewable energy in the present mix. Using the UK "grid-mix" of electricity would increase the payback to almost four years. Using a Scottish grid-mix would make the payback considerably longer than this, given Scotland's extensive use of renewables.

16. By compromising the physical and perceptual qualities of the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area, the qualities of the Coigach-Assynt National Scenic Area and undermining a nationally important peatland source, the proposed development compromises the '*natural environment, amenity and heritage resource*' of the Highland area. Its scale and siting mean it will have significant adverse effects. The Applicant has not demonstrated that these significant adverse effects will be outweighed by benefits of national importance. It follows that the proposed development is contrary to Policy 57 of the Highland Wide Local Development Plan.
17. The significant adverse effects arising from the proposed development potentially go beyond this application but are closely related to the determination of this application. If approved, the Sallachy wind farm could be the tipping point for extensive industrialisation of the south eastern part of the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area. A larger development, 'Achany extension wind farm', proposed to the south east of the proposed Sallachy development, also in the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area, is at scoping stage. If the Sallachy application is approved, it would make it easier for the Achany extension wind farm developer to argue the qualities of the south eastern part of the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area have changed and the baseline landscape no longer as wild as it was. Further industrialisation of the surrounding area can also be foreseen with a new overhead transmission line to connect Sallachy wind farm to the national grid (already at proposal stage) and future extensions to Sallachy or Achany wind farms, if these applications are approved. In this respect, one planning application decision can set in motion a course of events that determine the future of a whole Wild Land Area.
18. Policy 67 of The Highland Wide Local Development plan notes the Highland Council will support proposals for renewable energy '*where it is satisfied that they are located, sited and designed such that they will not be significantly detrimental overall, either individually or cumulatively with other developments.*' On our submission, this proposal would be significantly detrimental overall, individually, but also cumulatively, if the Achany extension wind farm was to be brought to application and approved. The impacts on the Reay-Cassley Wild Land Area and surrounding landscape would far outweigh this development's contribution to national energy generation and set unwelcome precedents for further exploitation of Scotland's Wild Land Areas.

In light of the points above, we urge the Highland Council Planning Committee to consider this application very carefully and to think long term about the trade-offs for the Highland region as what is at stake cannot be recovered once development on the scale proposed begins.

Yours sincerely,

The John Muir Trust