

LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S SCREENING OPINION ON

SCREENING OPINION REQUEST TO EXTEND THE TIME SCALE OF CONDITION 2 OF EXISTING PLANNING PERMISSION APP/Q2371/W/15/3134386. AGRICULTURAL LAND THAT FORMS PART OF PLUMPTON HALL FARM TO WEST OF THE FARM BUILDINGS, NORTH OF PRESTON NEW ROAD, OFF PRESTON NEW ROAD, LITTLE PLUMPTON, PRESTON (PRESTON NEW ROAD EXPLORATION SITE)

Applicant's Proposal

Condition 2 of the existing planning permission for the exploration wellsite at Preston New Road requires the site to be decommissioned and restored within a period of 75 months from the commencement of the development. The development commenced in April 2017 and therefore under the current planning permission, the site has to be restored by April 2023.

The EIA screening request is in relation to a proposal to postpone the restoration of the site until April 2025, a further two year period.

The North Sea Transition Authority previously issued a notice requiring the plugging and abandoning of both wells and which would have allowed the site to be restored within the planning permission timescale. In April 2022, a well suspension notice was issued which permits the continued suspension of the wells until the end of June 2023 and an ability to re enter both wells.

The applicant proposes that during the additional suspension period, the site would be utilised for well head maintenance and data collection purposes. The data collection period would be used to carry out a work programme that has been agreed with the North Sea Transition Authority which would allow further work to define the key controls on induced seismicity, improving the seismic imaging of natural faults and fractures and supporting additional research arising from the BGS scientific review of shale gas commissioned by the Government in April 2022.

On expiry of the suspension notice period, the NTSA may a) agree a plan to reuse one or both wells, b) agree a plan to bring one or both wells into production or c) require one or both wells to be plugged and abandoned.

The proposed planning application will be made on the basis that option c) will take place and that in June 2023, NTSA will issue a plug and abandonment notice for the site. This would then typically allow a 12 month period for the plugging and abandonment activities with site restoration being undertaken after that period.

No further drilling or hydraulic fracturing would be undertaken within the further period. The work programme to be undertaken within the suspension period would be desk based exercises and collection of data.

Observations on Selection Criteria for Screening Schedule 2 Developments

The proposed development falls within the descriptions of development contained in paragraph 2e and 13b of schedule 2 to the 2017 Environmental Impact Assessment

Regulations. Paragraph 2b relates to extractive industries including surface industrial installations for the extraction of natural gas where the development exceeds 0.5 ha.

Paragraph 13b relates to any change to or extension of development listed in paragraphs 1 to 12 in schedule 2 where that development is already authorised, executed or in the process of being executed.

The proposal would fall within Schedule 2 as it is a change to an existing development which is listed in paragraph 2b.

The Planning Practice Guidance contains further guidance on screening schedule 2 projects. For surface installations associated with gas extraction, the guidance says that EIA is more likely to be required for sites above 10 ha in area or where production is expected to be more than 100,000 tonnes of petroleum per year. The key issues to consider are the scale of development, emissions to air, discharges to water, the risk of accidents and arrangements for transporting the fuel.

Characteristics of the development

a) Size and design of development

The site is an existing hydrocarbons exploration site measuring 7.3 ha in area together with an access road onto the A584. At present the site is comprised of a stone surfaced compound surrounded by 4 metre high acoustic fencing and a security fence. The compound contains two well heads which were drilled in 2018 / 19. All of the above ground equipment associated with the drilling of the wells and subsequent fracturing operations has now been removed from the site. The only equipment remaining and which would be retained over the extended period is a flare stack and associated gas control equipment. The proposed additional investigation and scientific study works would not require any further significant infrastructure such as rigs or other tall or noisy items of plant and equipment.

b) Cumulative impact with other development

There are no other gas exploration sites or other similar development in the area which would result in cumulative impacts

c) Use of natural resources

The additional works proposed would not result in a significant increase in the use of natural resources compared to the situation with the existing proposal

d) Production of waste

The additional works proposed would not result in a significant increase in the generation of waste compared to the situation with the existing proposal. There would be no drilling or hydraulic fracturing operations that would give rise to any waste drilling muds or flowback liquid.

e) Pollution and nuisance

The activities on the site during the extended period would be limited in scale and would be unlikely to result in pollution impacts or in issues such as noise, seismic vibration or dust that would cause harm to local amenity.

f) Risk of major accidents and/or disasters

The exploration wells at the site have already been drilled and fractured and there would be no other works undertaken to further stimulate the boreholes. The risk of any damage to ground water or accidents due to release of pressure from the wells during the additional time period is considered to be low.

g) Risks to human health

The additional works to be undertaken would not result in any risk to human health

Location of the development

a) Existing and approved land use

The site is an existing hydrocarbons exploration site. The land immediately surrounding the site is in agricultural use. The nearest residential properties are located 230 metres to the south west of the exploration site

b) Quality and regenerative capacity of natural resources in the area

The application site is not located within any area that is covered by any higher tier landscape or ecological designations nor is it adjacent or close to any land that is functionally linked habitat to any of the European wildlife sites that exist at Morecambe Bay or the Ribble Estuary. The land surrounding the site is comprised of agricultural fields separated by hedgerows that does not have any designated ecological or landscape value and the proposal would not directly affect any habitats that lie within those areas

c) The absorption capacity of the natural environment

The setting of the application site is within an agricultural environment which is not particularly sensitive to change.

Characteristics of the potential impact

a) The magnitude and spatial extent of the impact

The proposal would involve a retention of the existing exploration compound the size of which would not be increased. The proposal is not expected to require a significant intensification in the activities that would be undertaken within the compound.

b) The nature of the impact

h) Landscape /Visual – the proposal would require the retention of the existing exploration wellsite compound including the perimeter fencing over a longer period. It is not expected that any of the operations to be undertaken over the extended period would require substantial items of plant or equipment that would significantly increase

the visual impacts of the site. The proposal would not prejudice the ability to restore the site back to an agricultural use following the extended period of operation.

ii) Ecology – the extended period of operations would all take place within the existing compound area and would not result in any additional impacts on ecological habitats that are current unaffected. The operations undertaken would be unlikely to generate levels of noise or other factors that might increase disturbance to birds or other wildlife in the surrounding area

iii) Noise and nuisance – The operations to be undertaken within the extended period would not involve any additional drilling or fracturing operations and therefore the additional noise impacts would be minimal. No further well stimulation is proposed and therefore it is very unlikely that any further vibration or seismic impacts would result.

iv) Pollution – the two exploration wells on this site have already been drilled and fractured and there would be no further operations proposed that would increase the risk of any ground or surface water pollution

v) Traffic – the proposed additional operations would not generate large amounts of HGV traffic. The plugging and abandoning of the boreholes and restoration of the site would give rise to a large number of HGV movements but these are already implicit in the existing permission.

c) The transboundary nature of the impact

There would be no transboundary impacts.

d) The intensity and complexity of the impact

The development is not of a type where it would result in particularly intense or complex impacts

e) The probability of the impact

The main environmental impact arising from the proposal would be in terms of the landscape / visual impact from retaining the site compound over a longer period. These impacts would have a high probability of occurring and could not be mitigated

f) The expected onset, duration, frequency and reversibility of the impact

The visual / landscape impacts would occur upon the retention of the site being permitted until such time as the site is restored. The proposal would not increase the difficulties of restoring the site upon cessation of the extended period.

g) The cumulation of the impact with the impact of other existing and/or approved development

There is no other hydrocarbon exploration development or other similar industrial development in the local area which would give rise to substantial environmental effects.

h) The possibility of effectively reducing the impact.

The visual / landscape impacts arising from the site being retained for a longer period could not be mitigated beyond the existing landscaping around the site. However, the proposed time extension would be relatively short term.

Conclusion

The main environmental impact arising from the proposal would be the landscape / visual impacts due to the exploration site being retained over a longer period. However, the period of additional retention would be relatively short and the site is not located in an area of designated landscape sensitivity. The proposal would not affect the ability to restore the site once the exploration boreholes have been plugged. The other potential impacts in terms of ecology, pollution and nuisance and traffic would be minor and not of a significance to require a need for EIA.

Screening Opinion

That the proposed development is not EIA Development for the purposes of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017.

A Mullaney

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