Non-technical Summary: Onshore Ecology and Biodiversity Net Gain

Introduction

This briefing note provides a summary of information relating to how the onshore work associated with the White Cross Offshore Windfarm project will affect biodiversity and ecology. For more detailed information see our Environmental Statement.

Ecological surveys

Specialist independent ecologists have surveyed the land that will be impacted by our cabling work to understand the biodiversity and habitats in the project area. All the surveys were carried out in accordance with industry best practices.

Habitats

The cable route has been amended to avoid directly affecting the Braunton Burrows Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Plans are in place to manage the impact of our work on the environment and on the most sensitive parts of the route we will be using trenchless drilling techniques so we leave habitats undisturbed. We will have an Ecological Clerk of Works (an independent specialist) on site to make sure wildlife and habitats are protected. They have the power to stop works if they are concerned, and they are there to ensure that construction follows the environmental management plans agreed in advance.

Bentonite

Drilling underground uses an inert and non-toxic clay called Bentonite as a lubricant. This clay is used because it can absorb many times its own weight in water. Our team will have a detailed plan to ensure that in the unlikely event of a spill, measures are in place to mitigate and contain the problem very rapidly. This plan will be submitted as part of the application further information and we will work with Natural England and other experts to ensure it is effective.

Our contractors will work to the highest standards and will follow expert advice to ensure Bentonite is used safely at all times.

Water and groundwater

Some flowers and habitats are sensitive to changes in groundwater and surface water. However, our cable route has been planned to be sufficiently far away from the SAC, and / or deep underground, that we are confident it will not have a significant effect on either surface water or ground water. The trenching and other works are not expected to cause any adverse effect on water or ecosystems.

Petalwort

Braunton Burrows is home to petalwort, which is a rare and protected species. However, the parts of the dunes which are likely to support petalwort are at least 100 metres away from the area where we need to work. We have commissioned a

Bryologist – a person specialising in the study of mosses and liverworts including petalwort – to review the data. We will share their report with North Devon Council and Natural England and make details available on the website.

Reptiles

Survey results show there are no sand lizards in the foredunes at Saunton Sands, so they cannot be disturbed during the work.

Birds

The limited removal of plants used by nesting birds will happen outside the nesting season (between March and August for the majority of species). If any small areas of vegetation need to be removed during the season our ecologist will check first to see if there are any nests before approving the work. If there are nests, work will be delayed until after the birds have finished nesting.

Additional survey work is being undertaken by a specialist environmental organisation to ensure we protect wintering birds during the onshore work. The focus of this survey work is to understand how birds are using the lapwing roosts in Braunton Marsh. The results of this work will help us make sure we are using the latest baseline data and allow us to implement the right mitigation measures.

Foraging Bats

Our ecologists have carried out surveys to monitor the presence of bats along Saunton Road, and we will put the correct measures in place to make sure they are not disturbed by the cabling work.

Providing temporary flight lines for bats is being explored. One way this is done is by using fencing covered with camouflage netting, to provide a replacement hedge line which acts as a temporary flight line. This is a tried and tested method of protecting bats during projects like this.

A lighting impact assessment covering the onshore temporary works area at Saunton Road will be submitted prior to consent to avoid disturbing wildlife. This will consider temporary lighting along the Onshore Cable Corridor and operational lighting at the Onshore Substation.

We do not expect to be working very often at night, so night time lighting will be the exception rather than the rule. However, even with this limited amount of lighting we will take appropriate measures to minimise disturbance to wildlife using down lighting and dimming lights where possible. Some low-level security lighting might be required at the compound locations, but this will also be minimised to avoid disturbance.

Biodiversity

We are aiming to achieve a 10% net gain in biodiversity once work is complete. This will mean that we leave the area and habitat better off in biodiversity terms than before we started work. Net gains in biodiversity are required by the local planning authority and will become legally binding during 2024.

Consequently, we have carried out work to establish a pre-development baseline biodiversity score in the Onshore Export Cable Corridor. Habitats have been identified

through survey work to give us a baseline. This work does not include Braunton Burrows and the Taw Torridge Estuary because at those two sites we will be using trenchless techniques which will not affect habitats. The results of our surveys show that no irreplaceable habitats will be lost as part of the onshore project.

After the work is completed, further surveys will show which type of habitats have been retained, created, enhanced or lost as a result of development. Using a specialist methodology that recognises the importance of different habitats, we will calculate which habitats are more strategically significant or distinctive. This ensures that the work we do will enhance or create habitats to compensate for any which are lost and is done on a “like for like” or “like for better” basis.

We have engaged with North Devon Biosphere through their Natural Capital Market Place for ways to deliver a net gain in biodiversity. Several on-site options to deliver the potentially required habitats have been identified. It is required by law that any measures put in place are maintained for a 30 year period to reach and uphold the target condition.