

SSE's "restoration" of the Beaully Denny construction tracks at Drumochter

Description

Restoration on North Drumochter Estate section of the Beaully Denny



Anyone who has driven along the A9 recently and taken a passing look out the window will be aware of the extensive scars across the hillside north of Drumochter summit, scars created by the Beaully Denny construction tracks which SSE were supposed to have fully restored. Take a closer look and it is also evident that there is a considerable area of "unrestored" ground around the base of each pylon.



Pylon across A9 from Dalwhinnie



Damage caused by track and pylon construction illuminated in the sunset

The impact of the failure by SSE and the Scottish Government – who were the Planning Authority for the Beaully Denny – to supervise the construction work properly has had a significant landscape cost. Instead of storing the vegetation and peat removed to create the tracks and towers, they have allowed peat and vegetation to be mixed in with the rocky soils beneath, and then replaced with scant regard to the pre-existing landscape forms. In the hot dry weather the exposed soils have dried out and what little vegetation there was has died off.



Muirburn dries out the soil but as this photo shows the impact of construction has been even greater

Once wetter weather does return, it is likely new invasive species will colonise the exposed mineral soils. Last year I spotted the invasive New Zealand willowherb on the section of restored track above Drumochter summit. Much of this land is supposed to be of conservation interest and is protected as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area.

SSE in their annual report on progress with the restoration last year, besides claiming most of the restoration was on track – an excuse to do nothing – blamed the failure of vegetation to recover in certain areas on over grazing. Interestingly they did not mention the impact of muirburn by the estate (visible in the photos). Fencing has now gone up around at least one these areas a mile or so north of Drumochter summit (sorry no photo). In my view the evidence shows the problem is much greater than what SSE have admitted to.



Looking south towards Drumochter summit and the Sow of Atholl

The example set by the Scottish Government and SSE, as one of our largest and most powerful companies, on how to minimise the impact of developments on landscape and ecology at Drumochter is appalling. I believe the CNPA were right to oppose the Beaully Denny but, having given the go-ahead, had the Scottish Government ensured that SSE had abided by the planning conditions none of this additional landscape impact and ecological destruction should have happened.

The Dalnacardoch section of construction track



In contrast to North Drumochter, I have had welcome news from planning staff at the Cairngorms National Park Authority about the section of track on the Dalnacardoch track which had been unlawfully left in place by SSE contrary to planning requirements ([see here](#)).

The CNPA and SNH met with SSE on site last month and have established that while most of the construction track did run along the Wade's Rd, as required by the Planning Consent, it has not been properly restored to resemble the landrover track which was here previously and is far too wide (up to 7 metres) for most of its length. The CNPA has clarified that formal responsibility for enforcement of these planning conditions lies with the Scottish Government – another failure there then – but have become involved in an area that is not their formal responsibility. I think this shows the type of leadership one might hope for and expect from a National Park and its I believe its really positive that the CNPA has put scarce resources into trying to address this issue. Having done so, SSE has now apparently agreed that the Dalnacardoch track needs to be restored. Well done to all the staff involved and also to the Board, who have long been concerned about the poor restoration of the Beaully Denny and who are planning another site visit in the Autumn.

The devil though is likely to be in the detail:

- The only effective way to restore the land here is for SSE to remove all the imported aggregate it dumped over the moorland to create the track. This will cost a lot of money although, with the dualling of the A9, there is an opportunity to re-use this material on road construction.
- There is at least one section where the construction track failed to follow the line of the Wade's Rd as required by the planning consent and one question is whether this should be retained to allow preservation of what is a historic monument. That may be decided through a new retrospective planning application to the CNPA to retain the new section of track. A more radical alternative would be to stop vehicles driving beyond this section of track and return it to a walking route.

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Looking south down the old Wade Military Rd with the edge of the new construction track just visible as a line above on the left.

- And then there is the question of how, without any spare vegetation, the ground below the aggregate can be restored and the track narrowed. CNPA has told me they are going to consider using vegetation removed by the A9 dualling construction. An opportunity perhaps not just for SSE, SNH and the CNPA to try out and demonstrate new restoration techniques which could then be applied to the section of track on the North Drumochter estate.

What needs to happen

Until the Dalnacardoch track was covered on parkswatch NO-ONE, whether from SSE, the Scottish Government, SNH or the CNPA appears to have checked whether the Beaully Denny planning conditions had been met. There now appears to be agreement from the agencies involved – if not the Scottish Government – that the track should not have been left and needs to be restored. This is most

welcome. One would hope lessons will be learned from all concerned about the need for staff to have the time to fully understand planning conditions and then to monitor these to ensure they are adhered to.

Looking forward It would help if all the public agencies involved committed to making any documents and agreements about the restoration public and consulting where appropriate. SSE has apparently committed to producing a Construction Method Statement for the restoration at Dalnacardoch, another welcome step in the right direction, but without transparency many of those concerned about what has happened at Drumochter will be left wondering. The documents should therefore in my view be published, whether on the Scottish Government Energy Consents website, the CNPA Planning Portal or SNH's website.

The first part of this post demonstrates that a similar approach now needs to be taken to the restoration of the Beaulieu Denny construction tracks and pylons on the north side of Drumochter on the north Drumochter estate.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. CNPA
2. landscape
3. planning
4. restoration
5. Scottish Government
6. scottish natural heritage
7. SSE

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