The latest planning applications at Cairngorm (2) â?? mountain bike trails and infrastructure

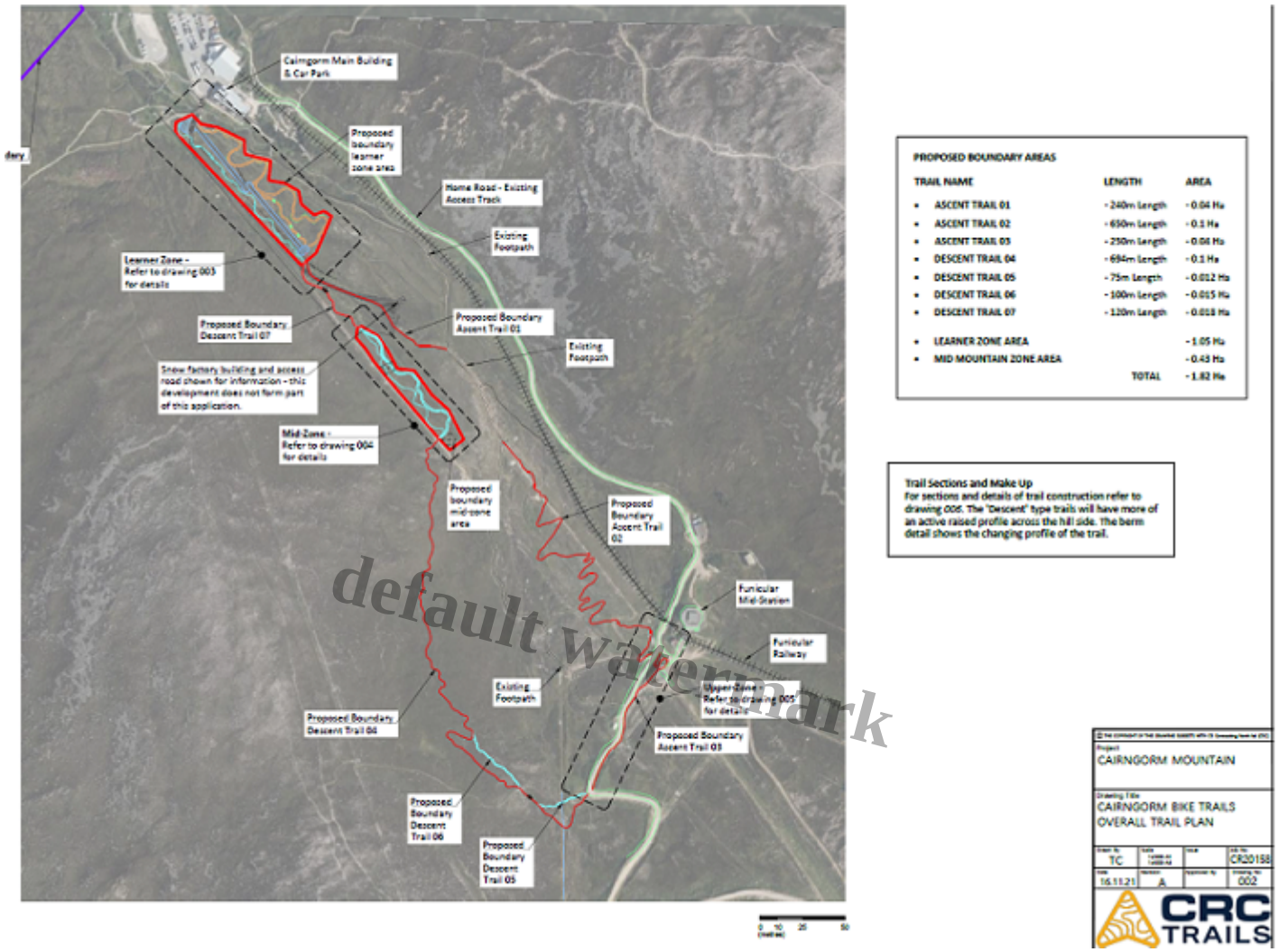
Description

This post considers Cairngorm Mountain Scotland Ltd (CMSL)â??s second planning application at Cairn Gorm, to create new mountain bike trails in lower Coire Cas. The application (see here for planning papers), as I will explain, is as poorly documented and thought through as the first, which was to create two new roads on the mountain (see here).

Incomplete plans

default watermark

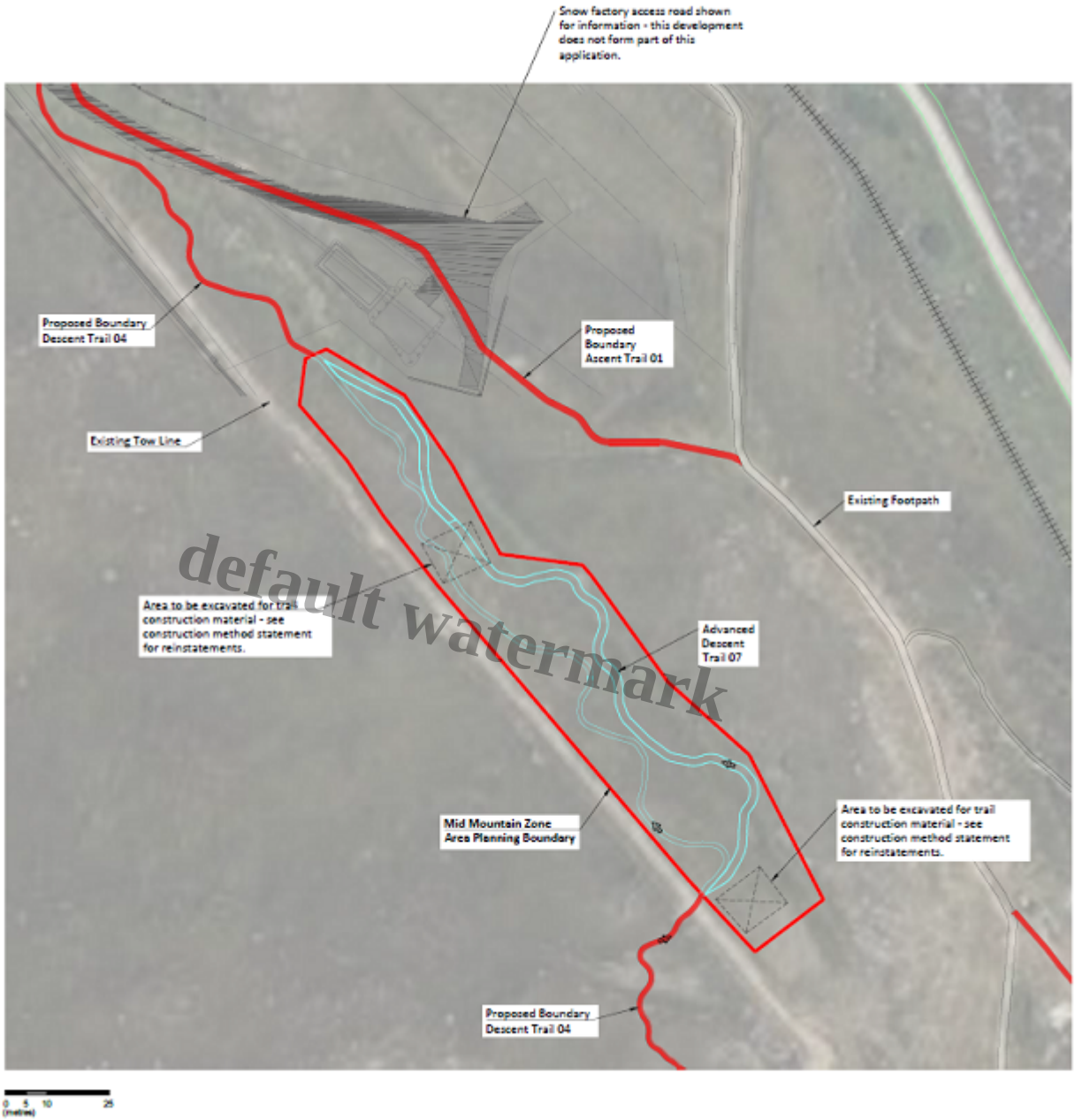
The title of the development, taken from the application form submitted by Ryden LLP, is â??Formation of a mountain bike track [singular] and related infrastructureâ?•. The application is in fact for a â??family oriented mountain bike parkâ?• with several tracks:



default watermark

CMSL/Ryden appear to have lifted plans for the tracks, as provided by CRC Trails, and included them in the planning application but have omitted to provide any explanation to go alongside this. This makes it very hard to understand the proposals, for example:

- there is no clear explanation of how the tracks will fit with existing snowsports infrastructure and the implications for this (indeed the primary purpose of the conveyor belt in the â??learning zoneâ?• would appear to be for snowsports but there is no reference to that in the application);
- there is no explanation of the purpose or concept behind the â??Ascent Trailâ?• and why it has been split in Ascent Trail 1, 2 and 3 when it all appears part of the same route;
- there is no key to the colour coding used for the â??Descent Trailsâ?• although it appears (but see below) to go brown, red, blue in ascending order of difficulty;
- if this interpretation is correct, someone wanting to cycle the â??medium difficultyâ?• red trail to the shieling and then back down could then get stranded as the two trails down the mid-zone are both blue and one is labelled as â??Advanced Descent 07â?•;



Mid-section showing the â??Advanced Descentâ?• Trail 07 (or should that be 007?). Note the proposed location of the snow factory and access road, which will presumably be subject of yet another planning application, and also the two pits to be excavated for trail construction material

How the inclusion of an â??Advanced Descent Trailâ?• fits with the overall concept which is for a beginnersâ?? mountain bike park, is not explained;

There are also a number of important omissions from the plans:

- there is no indication of how people will access the mountain bike trails from the car park let alone how that will fit with walkers using other footpaths;
- there are no links shown to the funicular or statement about if and how CMSL intend to use it to transport bikes to the mid-station;

- while three â??typical section layoutsâ?• are provided, there is no clear explanation of what layout will be used where or how these typical layouts relate to the nature of the ground.

Other important information missing from the application

CMSL has made almost no attempt to assess the likely impact of the development, for example on landscape, the natural environment or transport.

a) There is no landscape impact assessment although Coire Cas is part of the Cairngorms National Scenic Area as well as being in the National Park. That may well explain why response from the Cairngorms National Park Authority landscape adviser to the proposed development is not yet on the planning portal (it was due on the 8th March). I would be very surprised, however, if they didnâ??t conclude, as they did for the application for the two new roads, that:

â??itâ??s not possible at this stage to assess the full effects of this proposal on the National Park landscape due to insufficient information submittedâ?•.

default watermark

b) There is no ecological survey of the ground that will be affected although the â??Covering Letter, Supporting Informationâ?• (see here) refers to an â??Ecological Constraints Survey (Envirocentre November 2021)â?•. Perhaps the CNPA mistakenly forgot to upload the survey to the planning portal? The main supporting statement claims that â??*80% of the proposed bike park is on ground that has been manipulated by machinery during past skiing developmentâ?•.* The corollary of that 20%, ground in Coire Cas that has so far avoided being modified by human use, is going to be dug up for the first time while other parts are to be dug up all over again. There is no attempt to assess the impact of this on vegetation and slope stability (see here).?



View up the former ski tow onto Fiacaill Ridge, which will be crossed in two places (see top map) by the proposed mountain bike trails descending from the corner of the road (approximately where the snow fence on the left ends). The land on either side of the trench and banks created by the tow is generally unmodified and woodland has been slowly regenerating there.

c) The response from Highland Councilâ??s Planning Team (see here) is worth reading in full. It is damning about the quality of the planning application:

â??No information regarding access and transport has been provided. There is no information regarding additional trips this development will create and no information regarding existing facilities for public transport and active travel or deficiencies in the current provision for these modes.â?•

As it explains, the world has changed:

â??The Climate Change Act sets a legally binding net-zero emissions target of all greenhouse gases by 2045 and a reduction in emissions by 75% by 2030. The Highland Council are legally obligated to help achieve these targets. Therefore, it is essential that conditions for walking, cycling and public transport are improved to reduce the amount of vehicle trips that this new facility will generate.â?•

The transport planning section goes on to make a number of modest recommendations including improvements to the core path connecting Coire Cas to Glen More, covered bicycle parking and the installation of bus shelters with real time travel information. This shouldnâ??t be difficult, HIE committed to improve public transport provision and path connections to Coire Cas in its masterplan for Cairn Gorm which it published last year- although few should be surprised that that now appears to

have been forgotten.

(As an aside, whether or not the development goes ahead, if HIE was halfway serious about tackling climate change, all public buses up to Cairn Gorm should be fitted with ski boxes in winter and mountain bike carriers in summer, as happens all over the continent).

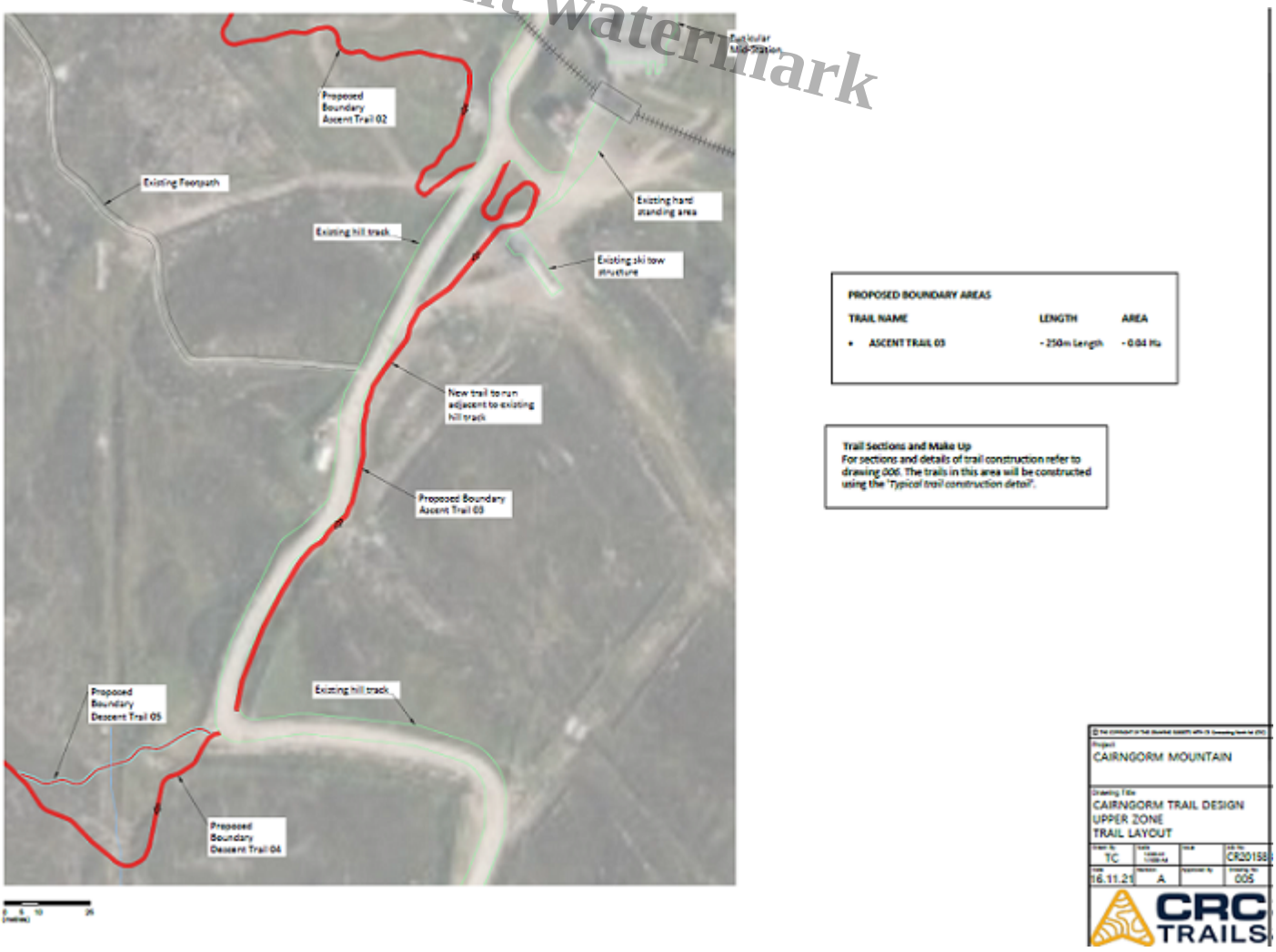
Some examples of the likely impact of the development

The Supporting Statement (see here) from CMSL, HIE and Ryden has a section on â??Considerate Landscaping and Designâ?•. This asserts that:

â??The visual impact is mitigated by the proposed setting, situated within lower Coire Cas, which is flanked by the steeper sided ridges of the Aonach and Fiacaill aâ??Choire Chaisâ?•

Thatâ??s it as far as landscape impact is concerned. Actually, Coire Cas faces Glen More and Aviemore, but here I will give an example of the more local landscape impact:

default watermark



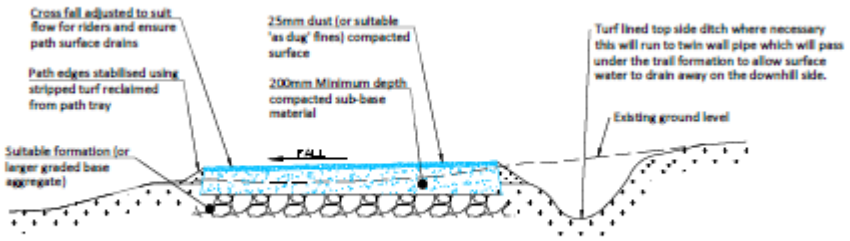
The proposal is that the top section of the ascent trail runs along the road up into Coire Cas the landscape impact of which I considered in The Cairngorms through the lens of Adam Watson (3) â?? Coire Cas, the long view. In effect CMSL is proposing to widen that road, which will increase its visual impact in summer.



The proposal is to add a mountain bike path along the upper side of this road. Photo August 2017

This is the same section of road/piste which Cairngorm Mountain Ltd, as it was then, modified and landscaped back in 2017. One cannot repeat enough HIE just treat Cairn Gorm as a neverending building site.

Just why a new mountain track is needed here, when vehicles on the mountain are supposed to be kept to the minimum, or what it will add to the biking experience is not explained. The section diagrams for the track donâ??t even explain its width:



Typical Trail Construction Detail

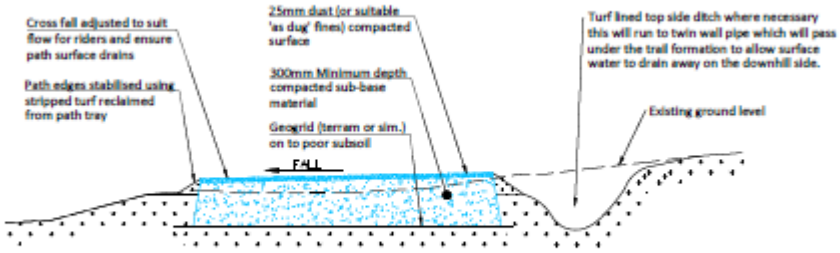
At the very least it appears the footprint of the road, if this development was allowed to go ahead, would be widened by a further 2m, making it even more visible. Not what the National Park should be about.

default watermark



View up the Shieling Track 2018

A second example. CMSL is proposing that Ascent Trail two (top map) will take a zig zag line up the ground between the Shieling Track and the snow fences and piste to the right. As you can see from the photo, the lower part of the proposed route is extremely boggy. That helps explain why one of the section drawings is for a â??floating trackâ?•:

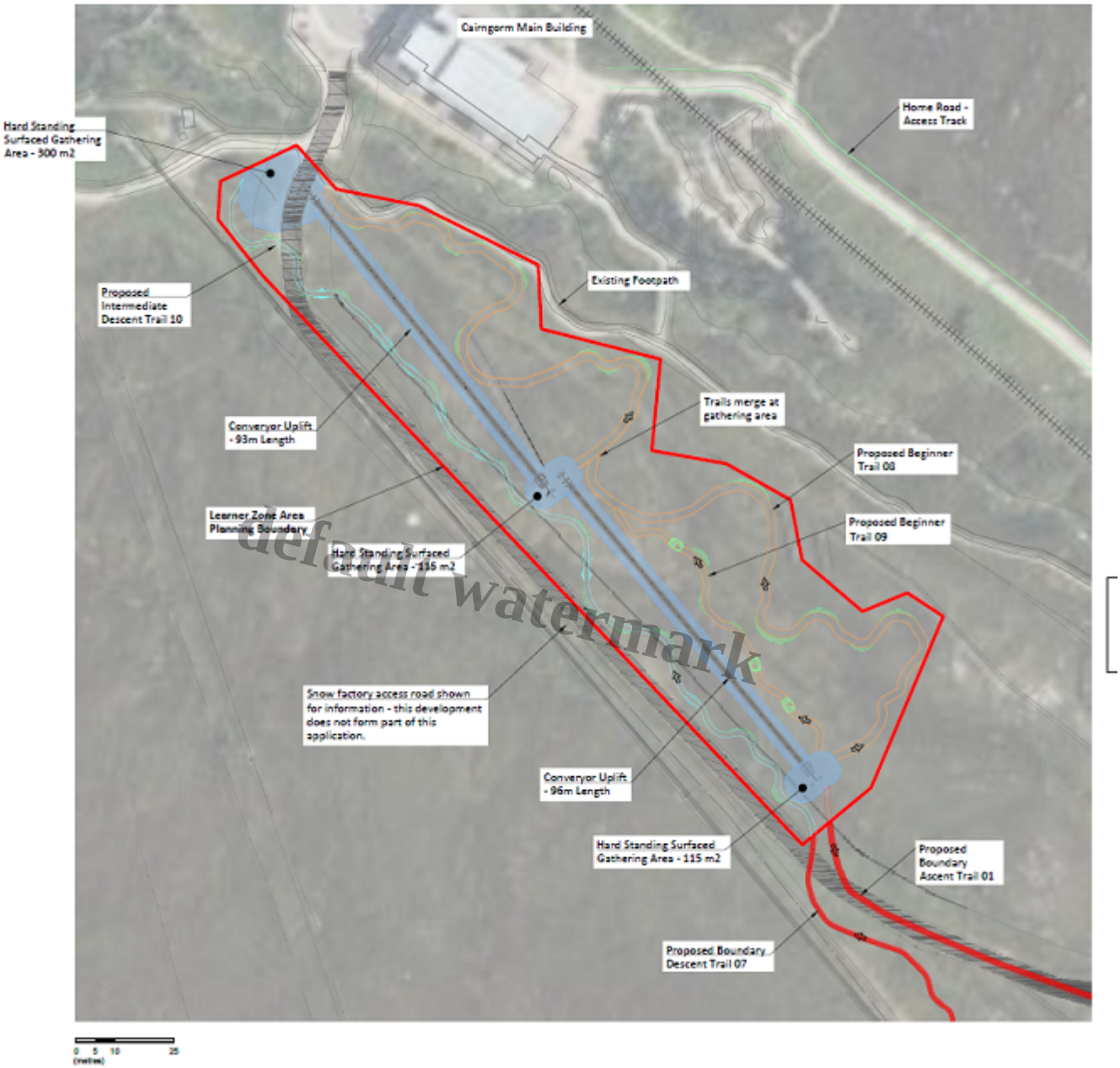


Floated Trail Construction Detail

default watermark

CMSL has made no attempt to assess what impact a floating track with drainage ditches will have on the peatland or what impact the zig zags will have on the landscape.

The impact of the learner zone in the area by the Day Lodge will be even greater:



In this plan the blue marks an â??intermediateâ?• trail whereas in the mid-section above blue means â??advancedâ?•! There is no key to the black shaded line which one might guess was a road but you will note that near the bottom of the map there are two parallel lines that run alongside it which are marked â??snow factory roadâ?•.

There will be two conveyor belts â?? which as I have pointed out before should not be needed for bikes â?? with areas of hard standing at the top and bottom of each. Alongside the conveyor belt will be a new access road to the re-located snow factory, which CMSL says is not part of this application. It should be! The further development of this bit of ground by the Day Lodge should be considered as a whole, not piecemeal.

But the overall intention of all this clutter, together with the tube slides below, is clear. HIE are trying to turn Cairn Gorm into a fun park.

A misconceived plan that is bound to fail

I am not against the development of mountain bike trails at Cairn Gorm if linked to a new modern chair lift system, so long as any uplift for bikes ends half way up the ski area, i.e below the most fragile soils. Indeed, I believe that designing uplift that can be used for both bikes and snowsports is the only way the mountain business could ever become financially sustainable.

But this is not what HIE/CMSL is proposing. While they are right â?? as they state in the Supporting Statement â?? that there is a market/room for beginners mountain bike trails on Speyside, the idea that this should be located at Cairn Gorm is completely wrong.

First there is the weather, the best way to put any child off mountain biking would be to take them up to Coire Cas in the wind and the rain. A learners facility should be low down and creating one in Coire Cas is likely to result in yet more public money being washed down the hill.

default watermark

Second, there is the impact of the trails on the ground. Beginners need wide smooth tracks at gentle gradients. The landforms that can support such tracks high up the hill are almost inevitably peaty or covered by fragile soils, exactly the places that mountain bike tracks should be avoiding. To make matters worse, the fines that are needed to surface such tracks to make them easy and safe for beginners to ride wonâ??t last long in the wind and the wet.

Cairn Gorm is not the location for a sustainable beginners bike track. With appropriate uplift, however, it would actually be far better suited to the more advanced mountain biker who is more likely to be prepared to brave the mountain in poor weather and is capable of riding â??hardâ?• paths, engineered to be at far less risk of erosion. But that would require more investment and people in HIE who know what they are doing.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Cairn Gorm
2. CNPA
3. HIE
4. landscape
5. outdoor recreation
6. paths
7. planning
8. public transport

Date Created
March 11, 2022
Author
nickkempe