

The Pitmain Estate's Gynack overflow – will the repairs, undertaken without planning permission, work?

Description



Pitmain, the view from Creag Bheag west of Kingussie showing the overflow channel through the trees, Pitmain Lodge and the extent of the muirburn beyond. Photo credit Parkswatch reader

The “repairs” ([see here](#)), ([here](#)), ([here](#)), ([here](#)) and ([here](#)) to the failed overflow channel between the Allt Mhor and Loch Gynack, intended to reduce flood risks in the village of Kingussie below and unused since 2018, are extensive. Indeed the evidence suggests the whole of the original footprint has been re-worked and this is not a repair but rather a re-construction of the original channel built in 2017. Despite this not a single new document has been published by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) on its planning portal ([see here](#)) since October 2017. There is nothing to explain either why the original construction failed so completely or why the new one will work.

The dereliction of duty on the part of our public agencies here is not just about ensuring that engineering of water courses is fit for purpose (the CNPA have not yet responded to question I asked

on 11th June about whether any plans had been submitted by the estate) or that sensitive river systems are protected from silt (it was flowing into the River Gynack for two months) its about tackling the source of the problems. The photo above brilliantly shows the extent of the muirburn above the intake of the overflow, located at the top left of the plantation. Muirburn destroys trees and bog forming plants, both of which would help to hold retain water above Kingussie, and caused more rapid water run-off when it rains. Intensive grouse moor management by the Pitmain estate has been the main contributor to the flood problem in the first place.

To rub salt into the wound, Majid Jafar, whose family owns Pitmain, is the Chief Executive of Crescent Petroleum which, like other fossil fuel companies, bears a high degree of responsibility for the climate crisis and the consequent increase in extreme flood events which have threatened places like Kingussie.

Despite all this, Highland Council paid Pitmain over £100k towards the original cost of the channel while NatureScot continues to fork out public money to the estate for Peatland Restoration ([see here](#)).

The current work appears to include reinforcing/replacing sections of earth bank with rip rap bouldering:

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Moving imported boulders into place along same section of bank July 2023. Photo credit Parkswatch reader.



View of the upper section of the overflow from the bridge September 2020 showing eroded bank on right

The design and construction of the banks along the lower sections of the channel was even worse and completely unfit for purpose:



Clearly, something had to be done but whether the finished item is any more likely to work than the last one is a moot point.



Looking down the channel from around half way towards Creag Bheag. The jumble of boulders in the middle ground shows the work is not complete. Photo credit Parkswatch reader July 2023.

Comparing this with a photo from a similar viewpoint showing how the channel looked during construction in October 2017 shows that while the work has been extensive many of the original design flaws have been repeated:



From the photos it appears that bank on the left may be slightly broader and the channel itself slightly narrower than previously. This suggests that the water that will be diverted down it may be less than originally planned. However, the rip rap bouldering and floor of the channel looks little different to what was done previously. As my post back in November 2019 showed both eroded seriously as soon as the channel was used ([see here](#)). Despite my call for the CNPA and others to investigate what lessons could be learned from this engineering disaster, no-one appears to have done this.

The recent photo also shows that so far there has been no attempt to restore any of the vegetation on the right bank and it is flatter than previously, creating an unnatural landscape.

From an engineering perspective the new channel looks to me like another disaster waiting to happen. On the first serious flood, what is to stop some of the rip rap boulders being plucked from the banks or to prevent the loose debris on the floor of the channel being swept away once again, releasing yet more silt into the river system? Time will tell but if the channel fails the Scottish Parliament's Climate Change Committee, part of whose role is to look at how Scotland is adapting to Climate Change, should investigate.

One hopes too that the new Convenor of the CNPA, Sandy Bremner, who is Chair of the River Dee

Trust and whose biographical details ([see here](#)) states this is “one of the biggest nature-restoration projects in the Cairngorms”, might be interested in the engineering of the Gynack overflow which appears to follow no ecological principles. Given his stated “determination that nature and people should thrive at a time of major challenges for both”, the management of the Gynack overflow planning application and land-use on the Pitmain Estate looks like a pretty good place to start. I will write suggesting a site visit!

Meantime, it is rumoured that the current work is due to be completed by 1st August, just before the Jaffar family return to Pitmain for the annual shooting jamboree. Whether the intensive grouse moor management on the estate has produced enough grouse this year to satisfy their appetites is unclear but, if not, there is a plentiful supply of pheasants as the sharp-eyed among readers may have spotted from the photo above!



Young pheasant among the construction

Category

1. Cairngorms

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