

The planning application for the Lochan Na H-Earba pumped storage hydro scheme on the Ardverikie Estate

Description



Aerial view of the stunning slip mass on the west side of Loch a Bhealach Leamhain which would be enlarged by a large dam if the pump hydro were to go ahead. To link this reservoir with Lochan na h-Earba tunnels would be bored through the hillside on the bottom right of the photo down to that water body.

Following many months of speculation, the long-trailed Earba pumped storage hydro scheme proposed by Gilkes Energy for Ardverikie Estate is now the subject of a formal planning application on the Scottish Government's Energy Consent Unit (ECU) website. Since it was first proposed, the installed capacity of the Earba scheme has doubled from 900 MW to 1,800 MW, no doubt with the intention of guaranteeing approval from the Scottish Government. To view the application ([see here](#)) or search [here](#) typing reference number ECU00005062 or 'Earba' into the website's Simple Search bar. Representations can be made through the website or sent by e-mail to EconsentsAdmin@gov.scot.

The Scottish Government's ECU website does not advertise deadlines for responses but I understand from the John Muir Trust website that the deadline is 12th April 2024.

Posting on Parkswatch a year ago ([see here](#)) Nick Kempe took apart the Earba proposal in some detail, highlighting the significant impact it would have on landscape and nature and calling for the Scottish Government to be actively involved in directing projects of this kind and scale to less sensitive sites. The present free-for-all allows private sector interests to determine which schemes are ultimately brought forward, leading directly to the proposal now on the table.

To be fair, Gilkes Energy seems to have taken on board some of the concerns expressed by John Muir Trust and others at the pre-application stage, producing a Mitigation Schedule that stretches to 41 pages. That's a powerful amount of mitigation for one scheme. Can this really be the right development in the right place? How many of the measures will be implemented and how many will actually work is open to question.

One of the biggest scars would be the network of access tracks, some of which require to be up to 6 metres wide. The developer is promising to reduce this post-construction, but by how much is unclear (details may be buried somewhere in the documentation). Recent experience of Run of River (RoR) hydro has highlighted the unwillingness of developers to deliver on their promises and the inability of planning authorities to enforce obligations. Would Earba be any different? [Ed. ten years on the Scottish Government has never enforced the planning conditions which were suppose to apply to the Beaully Denny powerline through the Drumochter ([see here](#))].

Four years of disruptive construction on a vast scale, up to 500 people working on site in the peak construction phase, a residential compound to house them - I don't think we really have any idea quite how huge and invasive this proposed development would be.



View across Loch Pattack to where the main dam would be located, between the Munros of Beinn a Chlachair (left) and Geal Charn (right). It is proposed the dam will raise the water levels of Loch a Bhealaich Leamhain by 74m and to cover the sloping dam wall with vegetation. Photo credit Nick Kempe May 2021

Like many people who care about wild places and who despair at the growing trend towards siting large-scale energy infrastructure in mountain areas, I feel overwhelmed by the weight of ‘green’ opinion stacked against me and deeply saddened by the apparent dearth of opposition from individuals and organisations. John Muir Trust seem minded to object but are polling their members first. Mountaineering Scotland surveyed their membership some months ago but received less than 300 responses, as I recall, with only a slim majority in favour of objecting. As a result, MS declared they ‘could not’ formally object but would instead comment. Had I been in their shoes I would have gone back to the membership and urged more people to vote in order to provide a better representation of views, but perhaps that would have been deemed coercive? It seems that sticking up for mountains and wild places is out of fashion.

Objecting to something because you passionately believe it is wrong, without necessarily having all the technical and environmental arguments at your fingertips, can be a daunting task, but object we must or risk seeing government and developers push ahead in what is rapidly becoming a feeding frenzy of the

disastrous kind, already witnessed in the context of wind farms and run-of-river hydro.

If there is no public backlash and no demand for a coherent policy defining the best locations for Pump Storage Hydro up front, more and more poorly sited proposals will surely follow. In fact, many are already in scoping. Leaving aside the already consented schemes of Coire Glas, Red John and the expansion of Cruachan, there are:

- Loch Kemp above Loch Ness;
- Balliemeanoch (focussed on Lochan Airigh near Inverary, lower reservoir to be Loch Awe);
- Corrievarkie (centred on Loch Monaidh, between Lochs Ericht, Garry and Rannoch);
- another project from Gilkes Energy listed as Loch Fearna. (I couldn't find this on Gilkes's website but it is listed on www.nationalgrideso.com. I have reason to believe that my heart sinks this is Loch Fearna of Quoich fame, nestling below Spidean Mialach. It was saved from a RoR hydro only a few years back, a rare triumph of common sense over greed.)
- plus the retrofitting of Loch Sloy to turn it into a pump storage scheme.

To paraphrase Nick's conclusions, the logical thing for the Scottish Government to do would be to work out what pumped storage capacity we need; work out whether this is best delivered through one or more big schemes or several smaller schemes; then identify the locations that would be least adversely affected by pumped storage and direct development to these sites.

In the meantime, people need to object if they don't want to see pumped storage schemes spreading like a rash across our mountain landscapes. Demand a rethink. There has to be a better way of increasing energy storage capacity than turning our finest landscapes into Frankensteinland.

P.S. It appears that pumped storage is not considered a renewable and is therefore ineligible for Community Benefit. The Chair of Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry Community Council is on record as criticising both Gilkes Energy and SSE Renewables on this point. (Oban Times, April 5, 2023: "Proposed Ardverikie pumped storage scheme sets alarm bells ringing." • [\(see here\)](#))

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Date Created

March 27, 2024

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