

## **LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S SCREENING OPINION ON**

**Title: Proposed Hydrocarbon Exploration site at land off Bonny Barn Lane, Marsh Road, Becconsall**

### **Applicant's Proposals**

The proposal is for the drilling of an exploration borehole to investigate the potential of underground strata to yield natural gas.

The development involves the creation of a completely sealed stone platform which would be used as the base for the drilling rig. This would be achieved by stripping off the topsoils and some subsoils and then laying an impervious membrane before applying stone to create the platform. The drilling operation would be undertaken over a period of 5 – 6 weeks, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. On completion of drilling, there would be a testing period to investigate any gas or oils discovered.

The proposal falls within Schedule 2 of the EIA Regulations as a deep drilling site of 1 hectare or more.

### **Observations of Director of Strategic Planning and Transport on Selection Criteria for Screening Schedule 2 Developments**

#### **Location of the development**

The proposed site would extend over an area of 1 hectare of a flat agricultural field located approximately 800 metres north of Marsh Road, a minor road which links the settlements of Banks and Becconsall. There are very few other developments in the area apart from isolated farms and dwellings along Shore Road, Marsh Farm (500 metres north of the site) and a single property 400 metres to the west of the site. The site is served off an agricultural track that serves Marsh Farm and the surrounding farm land and which links with Shore Road.

The site is not directly affected by any higher tier ecological or landscape designations. The boundary of the Ribble Estuary SSSI / SPA is located 600 metres to the north of the site. The site is located within a Biological Heritage Site designated for its value as a foraging area for wildfowl.

#### **Characteristics of the potential impact**

The site was previously developed in 2002 for hydrocarbon exploration through the construction of a compound although drilling operations were never carried out. The compound was removed and the land restored. The principle of development of this nature has therefore already been established. The proposed development could have a number of impacts, the main ones being:

Visual Impact – The development would be located in a very flat and open landscape. However, the site is not affected by any statutory landscape designations and the development would be temporary with the actually drilling operations lasting around 2 months. The compound development would be in place over a longer period but this would be at or near to ground level. The visual impacts of the

proposed development are considered not to be so great as to justify a need for EIA and visual impact could be considered as part of the planning application process.

Traffic – The development would give rise to substantial volumes of HGV traffic most particularly during the development and restoration of the compound area. However, these traffic movements would occur over a relatively short timescale at the beginning and end of the development and the development would not result in a long term increase in HGV movements on local roads. Whilst the highways serving the site are minor in nature and traffic from the site would have to pass through Banks village, the highway impacts are not by themselves considered to give rise to a need for EIA and the impacts associated with such could be addressed as part of the planning application process.

Ecology – The site would be on an area of arable land. The land has previously been disturbed by development works and by routine agricultural operations.

The main ecological impacts relate to the proximity to the SPA / SSSI and the location of the site within a Biological Heritage Site. In terms of the SPA / SSSI, the main issue relates to the impacts of noise and disturbance on the bird species that use the Ribble Estuary. However, the development would be 600 metres from the edge of the SPA / SSSI and the drilling operations themselves would be temporary short term activities which are unlikely to result in significant levels of disturbance to bird populations. The BHS is designated for its value as foraging area for wildfowl and there may be some impacts on the BHS due to the temporary loss of foraging land, or disturbance, for the bird species that migrate to this area from the SPA. However, the development would only affect a relatively small area of the overall BHS and the site could easily be restored to its previous agricultural use following completion of the drilling operations which would accord with the existing ecological value of the land. There may also be impacts on water voles that may use the ditches that are adjacent to two sides of this site. However the impacts of the development on water voles could be assessed through the planning application process. Overall the impacts on ecology are considered not to be so significant to justify a need for EIA.

Noise and Water Pollution - The drilling operations would generate noise, particularly as a result of 24 hour operations. However, the development is remote from large numbers of properties. The noise impacts could be assessed through the planning application process and are considered not to be so significant to require an EIA.

Drilling operations for hydrocarbons can present risks to water resources. There are agricultural drains on two sides of the site that could be contaminated by operations on the site. However, the development incorporates measures specifically to prevent any contamination and therefore it is considered that the pollution control impacts could be assessed through the application process.

## Conclusions

Appendix 3 of the EIA Regulations states that EIA is more likely to be required in cases where the site area exceeds 5 ha and that, on its own, exploratory deep drilling is unlikely to require EIA. This site is considerably smaller than 5ha and would not directly impact upon any environmentally sensitive area. The development would give rise to some environmental impacts, most particularly in relation to ecology,

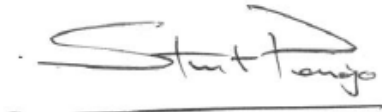
vehicle movements and noise. However, it is considered that such impacts could be assessed through the planning application process without the need for EIA.

The application site was subject to a planning application in 2002 for a similar drilling operation to that currently proposed. It was considered that the planning application for that development did not need to be accompanied by an EIA.

**Director of Strategic Planning and Transport’s Screening Opinion**

That this development is not EIA Development for the purposes of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 1999.

Reason: The development is of a relatively small scale and would be of temporary duration. The development is not located within an environmentally sensitive area and given the distance between the site and the SSSI / SPA and the likely environmental impacts of the development, it is considered that the effect on ecological interests would not be so significant as to justify a need for EIA. The other potential impacts such as traffic, noise and visual intrusion could be adequately assessed through the planning application process and would not by themselves generate a need for EIA.



\_\_\_\_\_, pp Director (Strategic Planning and Transport)  
25<sup>th</sup> August 2010 ..... Date