

From John Thurso MP

Dear Sirs,

Consultation on Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission's proposed transmission project between Caithness and Moray in northern Scotland

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to your current consultation on the Caithness to Moray transmission project.

I agree with Ofgem's initial assessment that the strategic reinforcement of the electricity network serving Caithness, Sutherland, Ross-shire and Orkney is required (with potential for Shetland also to connect in the future). Additional network capacity has a critical role to play in unlocking the renewable energy resources - particularly offshore and island-based - around the north of Scotland. This generation is important to providing an economic, balanced and secure electricity supply to consumers in the future. It also represents an important element in the sustainable economic future of the communities that I represent, with potential to deliver significant numbers of skilled jobs and training places.

The Caithness to Moray project, as proposed, could deliver the capacity which is required in the network by 2018, with planning consents already in place for all of the component developments. This would ensure that network constraint does not become a serious limit on investment in the north of Scotland; and that consumers are protected from the payments to constrained generators that could also result from failure to resolve the 'bottle-neck' in the network promptly. It is welcome that the subsea cable option has been taken forward, following consultation with a wide range of parties, with consideration for impacts on people and the environment - and the broader costs which would be likely to arise from these, both for consumers across the country and for the wider economy of the local area. I understand that the HVDC system proposed would also significantly reduce the loss of electricity in transmission, contribute to the resilience of the network as a whole and facilitate potential future connections for the islands.

I particularly want to comment on the alternative onshore option which the consultation discusses. From my experience of smaller new overhead line projects elsewhere in my constituency, I am confident that a major overhead line upgrade down the east coast of Caithness and Sutherland would encounter significant levels of public opposition, as well as costly engineering and environmental challenges. The existing overhead line is already prominent in the landscape, crossing difficult terrain very close to the critical A9 trunk road. Access and the impact on the road would be major issues to overcome, among many others. All of this would be likely to result in significant delay, a Public Inquiry and onerous planning conditions in the event that consent was granted. The timetable for delivering the reinforcement and the final cost would therefore be extremely uncertain. Ultimately, I am concerned this option could both stall the deployment of renewable energy generation in the north and result in a non-optimal solution for the wider local economy.

I would urge Ofgem to allow the project to progress through the regulatory process promptly - applying appropriate scrutiny, but also recognising that completion of the infrastructure on time and within the proposed budget will deliver the best long term value for current and future consumers.

Yours sincerely

John Thurso MP

Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross.