Issues for Scotland's Energy Supply

Response from the Mountaineering Council of Scotland

Introduction

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCofS) is the representative body for hillwalkers, climbers and off-piste skiers and receives core grant funding from sportscotland in recognition of this status. We are a membership organisation with over 2,000 individual members plus 130 affiliated clubs that contain over 7,000 members. Our Committee structure is entirely voluntary and appointments are the result of a democratic process. The professional staff complement is made up of four posts at our Perth office.

As Professor Maxwell Irvine says in the introduction to this Royal Society of Edinburgh inquiry: "Energy is quite simply the most important commodity for our survival", and yet there has been a clear lack of opportunity for public consultation on the fundamental basis of our nation's short-term and long-term energy strategies. This consultation exercise, as part of the Society's Energy Inquiry, is therefore a welcome opportunity for the public to participate in this crucial process, and the MCofS wishes to contribute to the debate that has now been initiated.

The Global Context

In addressing the British and Scottish issues that this study is focusing on we believe that the global context must be considered at all times. The biggest global impacts from burning fossil fuels over the next few years are going to be from China and the USA. The actions of Britain's Parliament, devolved Parliaments and private companies are going to influence what happens around the world as well as here in Britain. We believe that this inquiry should investigate and comment on the influence our nation can have on the global issues as well as on our contribution to wider issues from within our own shores.

Whilst a major part of our influence should be via demonstrating best practice in our own country, we have to be mindful of the damage our government and companies can perpetrate abroad by operating to different standards, for example, by encouraging renewable energy projects in the UK whilst building coal fired power stations in China.

Concerns

The MCofS shares the concerns expressed by many other individuals and organisations about the effects of burning fossil fuels and the widely held belief of the links to global climate change and the problems associated with that. We are keen to see solutions to these problems being found both from a concern for the wider interests of humanity, and from a more specific concern for the mountain environment that is the focus of the MCofS's work.

A particular concern that we have, and which we will discuss throughout this response, is for the mountain landscapes within Scotland and the potential for a great deal of damage to be caused for the return of very little power. We believe that decisions affecting the mountain environment are not being made on the basis of a well-thought out long term strategy, because current decisions appear to be made with short term business interests in mind, and we believe government is failing to provide any kind of useful long term guidance or strategy.

For a number of years government policy was to build nuclear power stations, but this was accompanied by mounting public concerns over safety within the nuclear industry. As a reaction to these rising concerns there has been a growing popularity for renewable energy generation, but we suspect this rise in support has been reversed since government announced support for renewable energy production, and failed to provide locational guidance for the development of onshore wind factories. The increase in size of wind turbines and the persistence of developers when targeting areas of popular landscape value is doing much to harm the reputation of renewable energy, and this is a major concern for the MCofS, especially as many of our members would support renewable energy if there were stronger controls over its development.

Long Term Energy Issues

We believe that Britain should always have a diversity of energy supply, but in the long-term the main source of power will have to be from a renewable source, and this is most likely to be related to tidal movements. There is much discussion at the moment about sources of marine energy, but we draw a distinction between tidal and wave energy, in that tidal is entirely predictable whilst waves are related to wind and can only be predicted up to a day or two in advance.

In seeing the potential for generating massive amounts of power out at sea, it follows that the future transmission of that power will be mainly via underwater cables. The greater the amount of power being generated the greater will be the investment in the transmission network. We believe that the current proposals for onshore wind factories on Lewis are being linked to a highly damaging proposal for pylons through some of Scotland's finest mountain areas because the amount of energy the proposed Lewis factories would produce is actually so low that they would only justify the cheapest means of transmission. We would like to see a long term strategy being developed and underwater cabling being adopted as one of the main methods of transporting electricity.

The biggest limiting factors in developing tidal power stations are going to be civil engineering capability and finance. These are more realistic barriers than the oft cited availability of technology. Turbine technology exists now but the civil engineering capability and finance are not likely to be available until some point later this century and we believe that plans should be considered now for where such projects will be sited and how they will be financed.

Tidal power would not be without its landscape, or seascape concerns and we would not want to see scenic stretches of coastline being ruined by developers. On the whole we

would favour tidal power stations that were some way out to sea, but where they are closer in to shore we would envisage such large amounts of power being generated that the loss of scenic value and recreational amenity would be offset by the massive contribution to the nation's energy requirements. For example, the Pentland Firth could provide a significant proportion of the entire UK's energy demand and by harnessing the power from that one place the need to consider potential wind factory sites around the country would be significantly reduced.

The long term future of nuclear power is going to depend on the future development of nuclear research. Whilst it is possible to envisage a future without nuclear power, research into the development of cold fusion may well lead to the production of much safer forms of nuclear energy. For this reason we believe that government should keep an open mind about nuclear power. From a landscape point of view nuclear power has the advantage of requiring fewer power stations, but it does have the obvious disadvantages from its inherent safety concerns.

Short Term Energy Issues

We believe that the British and devolved governments should pursue a number of short term policies that would be far more productive than the current emphasis on onshore wind turbines, and would be more sensible lead-ins to a realistic and sensible longer term strategy.

The UK's growing dependency on gas imported from volatile countries in Eastern Europe and beyond for our electricity generation is likely to provide us with a major problem at some point in the not too distant future. The increased use of gas is taking us away from the diversity of supply policy that many believe to be the wise approach for a nation to follow. Furthermore, the phasing out of old nuclear power stations with only part of the shortfall of power being replaced by renewables means that gas is accounting for a significant part of the replacement of phased out nuclear power.

We therefore believe that another generation of nuclear power has to be considered, before renewable power stations can be constructed to create levels of power on a similar scale to nuclear and fossil fuel power stations.

We would also like to see more investment in the development of micro-scale renewable energy, because this would entail more community involvement, raise greater awareness of energy conservation and regain some of the credibility in renewables that has been lost in recent years. This should be allied to better building regulations and stricter standards of insulation. At the same time that small scale renewables are being installed and used we would like to see research being carried out into the large-scale harnessing of power from renewable sources, with an emphasis on tidal energy, but with other sources being considered alongside that. We believe that this approach would be right for the nation and would divert us away from the current policy that threatens our landscapes and fails to address our energy supply dilemma.

Given the current controversy over proposed wind factories in the Western Isles we feel that rather than persisting with unpopular proposals that are turning people against renewable energy, there should be a radical change in policy away from attempting to export energy from remote locations like the Western Isles towards helping such places become self-sufficient in electricity, thereby opening up the possibility of taking them out of the national grid. As well as reducing the impact on landscapes, we feel that this policy would create more employment and gain more local support in places like the Western Isles.

Environmental and Social Considerations

Many people, whether they live in Scotland or not, have a pride in this nation because of its world famous landscapes. Tourism does depend on landscape and the attitude that tourists just come anyway is incredibly dangerous and irresponsibly naïve. We are currently in grave risk of destroying our international reputation as a country with spectacular scenic beauty because of a lack of government energy policy and a relaxed attitude to the short-term thinking behind the current "dash for wind".

We do need to consider the effects of climate change on habitats and species, but we also need to be realistic that worldwide action is going to determine the impact on Scotland, and not just what we do within our own country.

The management of waste, especially nuclear waste, needs to be taken seriously and acted upon with responsibility. For example, we have concerns that the USA is considering the dumping of nuclear waste in space and hope that the UK government would advise the US administration against any such irresponsible practice that could have catastrophic consequences.

There is now so much doubt over the value of onshore wind factories, and increasing controversy over their impacts on landscape, that they are rapidly losing political support. As more and more wind factories are entering the planning process and those coming through that process are being built, many people are being exhausted as they devote long hours to a reactive battle to save our landscapes, and this is happening at a time when those people should really be participating in a proactive debate about our future energy supply. We therefore believe that there should now be a moratorium on onshore wind turbines above a certain size so that the current debate can be rational and properly considered. The debate that the Royal Society of Edinburgh is attempting to instigate will be very difficult to conduct if widespread damage to our landscapes is going on at the same time.

Public Attitude

Whilst many people criticise government for not having an energy policy, there clearly is a policy because government subsidies are used to guide the industry in the direction that government chooses. However, current subsidies are leading to what we, along with many others, regard as the short-sighted "dash for wind" that is causing considerable opposition and anger. The current financial structure is engendering a great deal of suspicion and a feeling that government is more interested in the short term interests of

large companies and their own party's re-election, than the long term future of the nation's energy supply, or their concerns for the planet.

From our observations the general public view on energy, lets say five years ago, could have been described as anti-nuclear with increasing support for renewables, but the last 2 to 3 years has seen a change in those trends. We feel that concerns about the landscape impact of onshore wind factories has damaged the wider reputation of renewables and caused many people to review their thoughts on nuclear. We would like to suggest there is a linear scale of attitude towards nuclear power as follows.
Violent objection – Passive objection – Skeptical – Neutral – Curious – Passive support – Strong support.
We think that most people have held an entrenched position on nuclear power for many years, but a significant number have changed their views in the last 2 or 3 years, with most moving, perhaps only one or two places, in the direction of the support end of the scale. We actually wonder if the threat of wind factories in scenic areas is a deliberate government tactic to gain more public support for at least one more generation of nuclear power!

If government is serious about renewables, as opposed to using one form of renewable energy as a means of gaining public acceptance of nuclear power, then we would like to see its commitment to other forms of renewables and a recognition that it needs to take the public with it rather than forcing through onshore wind factories against the wishes of local and national opinion.

Mountaineering Council of Scotland
22 July 2005