

Scottish Water

Luskentyre Sands, Isle of Harris

Ecological Survey Report

October 2022

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[redacted]

Summary

An ecological survey was carried out of the area of the proposed works to re-bury and anchor the recently exposed section of mains pipeline across the beach between Seilebost and Luskentyre, Isle of Harris. No significant numbers of wintering/passage birds or signs of otter activity were recorded during the survey. There is some potential for impact on habitats within the designated site Luskentyre Banks and Saltings Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

1 Introduction

The pipeline is located on Luskentyre sands, Isle of Harris, grid reference NG 075 980. The mains pipe crosses the estuary of the Laxdale River from Seilebost in the south to Luskentyre in the north. The site lies within the Luskentyre Banks and Sands Site of Special Scientific Interest, and within 1.5km of the West Coast of the Outer Hebrides classified Special Protection Area.

An ecological walkover survey of the area of the pipeline was requested to facilitate the re-burying and anchoring of the mains. The survey aimed to identify any ecological constraints ahead of the proposed works at the Luskentyre sands pipeline.

2 Methodology

A walk over survey of the site was undertaken by Alison Tyler, an experienced ecologist, on 12 October 2022. The survey was undertaken between 1130 and 1630 GMT in good weather conditions, either side of mean low water spring tide.

The survey covered the full extent of the pipeline route from Seilebost in the south to Luskentyre in the north, including an area up to 300m either side of the pipeline. All birds and marine mammals within 300m of the pipeline were recorded. A search was undertaken for evidence of protected species. The sections of the beach above mean high water were checked for any signs of use by otters, including potential for resting places.

Within the survey area, a systematic search for signs and evidence of otter activity was carried out. The coastline and watercourses (including shallow ditches) were searched for signs of use by otters. All habitat with potential for resting places and holt were searched.

A survey of wintering and passage birds was carried out using telescope and binoculars to cover the whole survey area.

3 Limitations of Survey

The timing of the survey in October meant that a survey of breeding birds was not possible. The timing was suitable for the survey of wintering and passage birds

using the intertidal area and inshore waters. There is potential for plant species to be under-recorded if they were not flowering at the time of the survey. The seasonal timing of the survey was suitable for otters.

4 Results

Habitat

The southern section of the pipeline route at Seilebost (grid reference NG 07529 97331), between the sandflats and the A859 is croftland. This comprises mainly rough grazing with some areas of relatively tall vegetation including umbellifers, knapweed and iris, with evidence of prior cultivation. A narrow strip of saltmarsh and rocky coastline is between the croftland and the sandflats.

The exposed section of the mains pipe is within the intertidal area of sandflats and lies across a drainage channel from the Laxdale River, at NG 07487 97751. The surface of the pipe is colonized by fucoids and gutweed *Ulva intestinalis*. The area immediately surrounding the pipeline is typical of the intertidal zone of the estuary.

The northern section of pipeline route crosses the sandflats to the rocky shore at Luskentyre, with a narrow strip of rough grazing to the south of where the pipeline runs to the junction by the unclassified road at NG 07533 98488.

Birds

Groups of waders and wildfowl were observed feeding and resting on the sandflats. A maximum count of 9 curlew *Numenius arquata*, 4 mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* and 7 whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus* were recorded within 300m of the pipeline route.

Otters

No otters were seen during the survey and no signs of otter activity were found within the survey area. Sites where spraints could be expected to be seen, for example prominent grassy knolls on the coastal edge of the rough grazing, had no signs of use by otters.

4 Assessment

Habitats

The pipeline runs through habitats of local and national importance, and the location is within the Luskentyre Banks and Saltings SSSI (see below). The pipeline route runs through several types of habitat, from rough pasture, to saltmarsh and intertidal sandflats, which are notified natural features of the SSSI. Changes to habitat as a result of the works at the exposed section of pipe are likely to be of short duration as a result of the dynamic sandflat habitat. Growth on the surface of the pipe is not of particular significance.

Birds

The coastal section and area of intertidal habitat provides foraging ground for wintering and migrating birds, particularly waders and wildfowl. The numbers of waders and wildfowl recorded during the survey within 300m of the pipeline route are not of national significance, however there is potential for higher numbers during the migration period. The SSSI citation notes that the site is important for wintering and migrating birds. The possible disturbance as a result of the works will be in a limited area, and of relatively short duration. The feeding area for waders and wildfowl on the sandflats is significantly larger than the area that will be directly affected by the works, and therefore there is potential for birds that are disturbed by the works to move to other areas within the same estuary.

The breeding bird assemblage was not surveyed. There is significant potential breeding habitat for birds, including corncrake, in the grassland habitat within 300m of the Seilebost (southern) end of the pipeline route, and therefore the works should avoid the breeding season between April and August to avoid disturbance to breeding birds.

Otters

No signs of otter activity or presence of resting places were found within 300m of the pipeline. However, the pipeline lies within an area of diverse, high quality habitat for otters. The presence of running and brackish water, in addition to the coastal habitat, provides both suitable foraging areas and some potential for resting places. No resting places were identified within 300m of the pipeline during the walkover survey and the proposed works at the exposed section of pipeline are unlikely to cause disturbance to otters. [redacted]

Designated Sites

The pipeline lies within the Luskentyre Banks and Saltings SSSI, notified for coastal geomorphology and habitats including sandflats and saltmarsh. The site is important for both physiographical and botanical features. The works to re-bury and anchor the mains pipe have the potential to cause temporary damage to notified features, particularly the sandflats. Normal movement of sands will likely cover the works site soon after the pipeline has been reburied.

Timing of the works to avoid the summer months could lessen the impact on important habitats and breeding birds, however there is also some potential for disturbance to migrating and wintering birds.

The West Coast of the Outer Hebrides classified Special Protection Area (SPA) is located within 1.5km of the proposed works on the mains pipe at Luskentyre. The qualifying interest of the SPA is the assemblages of waterfowl feeding in the inshore waters. The proposed works are on the intertidal area and are only possible at low tides when the sandflats are exposed, and are therefore unlikely to impact the populations of waterfowl within the SPA.

Appendix Photographs



Photograph 1

Southern section of pipeline route at Seilebost, where pipeline meets A859.



Photograph 2

Coastal zone at southern end of pipeline



Photograph 3

Seilebost croftland at southern section of pipeline route



Photograph 4

Exposed section of mains pipe crossing sandflats and drainage channel



Photograph 5

Section of exposed pipe in sandflats



Photograph 6

Northern section of pipeline route to coast at Luskentyre

