



# Western Isles HVDC Link

## Protected Species Mitigation Plan

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# 1. Overview

This Protected Species Mitigation Plan (PSMP) summarises the mitigation measures which shall be implemented during geophysical survey operations to avoid or reduce the potential risks of injury and disturbance of protected species that may be present in the vicinity of the survey operations. Species and task specific mitigation is provided below; however, the following measures will be implemented during all survey works:

- All vessels will adhere to the provisions of the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code (NatureScot, 2017a), Guide to Best Practice for Watching Marine Wildlife (NatureScot, 2017b) and Basking Shark Code of Conduct (Shark Trust, 2024);
- Survey crew will be made aware of all protected species within the marine environment, and their responsibility to implement the mitigation in this document;
- Toolbox Talks will be conducted prior to the commencement of new survey activities, to ensure all personnel are aware of the task specific mitigation requirements; and
- When conducting nearshore geophysical surveys (within 1km of Mean High Water Springs (MHWS)), the first survey line will commence at the most landward source position in survey area, and proceed seawards away from the coast. This will ensure animals are not 'herded' towards the coast. After the initial line is complete, reciprocal lines can be continued as normal, as it is assumed that any animals which were close to shore will have moved seawards of the survey area, after the completion of the first line.

## 2. Marine Mammals

A Marine Mammal Protection Plan (MMPP) will be prepared in order to reduce risk of injury and disturbance to marine mammals resulting from SBP and UHRS survey operations, this will be aligned to JNCC guidelines for minimising the risk of injury to marine mammals from geophysical surveys (JNCC, 2017). It is noted that this equipment is not capable of performing a soft-start, and hence this procedure is not included. The key components of the MMPP for SBP and UHRS include:

- Deployment of an MMO to monitor for the presence of cetaceans and seals, prior to the commencement of SBP and UHRS operations;
- For SBP and UHRS operations during hours of darkness and/or in periods of poor visibility and/or during periods when the sea state is greater than Beaufort 3, deployment of a Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM) system to detect for the presence of vocalising cetaceans that cannot be detected by the MMO;
- 500 m mitigation zone for cetaceans. If UHRS at 0.1 kHz is operated this will be increased to 600 m;
- The mitigation zone for seals will be reduced to 200 m in the event of a need to avoid critical delay to the project. MD-LOT will be notified upon any reduction in mitigation zone;
- If the SBP or UHRS is deployed on an uncrewed surface vessel or other autonomous vehicle, the mitigation measures outlined below will be conducted from a support vessel or suitable vantage point on land; and
- Reporting of survey activities and marine mammal sightings.

### 2.1. M1 – Marine Mammal Observer (MMO)

There will be MMO coverage for the duration of the UHRS and SBP activities, with adequately trained and experienced MMO(s) working standard 12-hour shifts. They will have experience of working at sea and will have successfully deployed and used PAM equipment previously and will be equipped with binoculars

offering at least 8x magnification. The MMO will be located at a high point on the vessel, providing good all-round visibility.

## 2.2. M2 – Marine Mammal Monitoring

During daylight hours the MMO(s) will carry out visual observations to monitor for the presence of cetaceans and seals before the UHRS and SBP is activated and will recommend delays in the commencement of the operation should any cetaceans or seals be detected within the 500 m mitigation zone. If UHRS is being operated at 0.1 kHz, this mitigation zone will be increased to 600 m.

The mitigation zone for seals may be reduced to 200 m in the event of a need to avoid critical delay to the project, subject to agreement with MD-LOT.

If the SBP or UHRS is deployed on a ROV, USV or AUV, this will be the centre of the mitigation zone, and not the observation vessel. Should any cetaceans or seals be detected within the mitigation zone prior to the commencement of SBP or UHRS operations (or after breaks in SBP or UHRS survey activity of more than 10 minutes), operations will be delayed until their passage, or the transit of the vessel, results in the cetaceans or seals being outwith the mitigation zone. In both cases, there will be a 20 minute delay from the time of the last sighting within the mitigation zone to the commencement/recommencement of the SBP or UHRS operations.

## 2.3. M3 – Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM)

If UHRS and SBP operations are required when visibility is poor (i.e. due to fog or during hours of darkness) and/or during periods when the sea state is greater than Beaufort 3, the PAM system will be operated by a single MMO/PAM operator. The PAM system shall comprise of at least 3 hydrophone elements, allowing for directional localisation of detections, together with software allowing real time automated detection of marine mammal vocalisations (e.g. PAMGuard or equivalent).

## 2.4. M4 – Pre-Start Search

Visual (MMO) (and acoustic (PAM) monitoring if required) will be conducted for a pre-start search of 30 minutes i.e. prior to the commencement of UHRS and SBP operations. This will involve a visual (during daylight hours) or PAM watch (during poor visibility or at night) to determine if any cetaceans or seals are within the monitoring zone, as defined in Section 2.2.

## 2.5. M5 – Reporting

During survey campaigns involving UHRS and SBP operations, all recordings of cetaceans and seals will be made using JNCC Standard Forms. At the end of the operations, a monitoring report detailing the cetaceans recorded, methods used to detect them, and details of any problems encountered will be submitted to MD-LOT. The report will also include feedback on how successful the mitigation measures were. This reporting requirement will be communicated to the MMOs at project start up meetings and at crew change.

# 3. Seabirds

## 3.1. M6 – Rafting Seabirds

The survey vessels will be moving at a speed of 4-8 knots during survey operations, to allow any rafting seabirds time to disperse before the vessel arrives. When not on survey effort, vessels will avoid bird rafts where operationally possible, and safe to do so.

### 3.2. M7 – Light Disturbance

When within 2 km of an SPA and where there is potential for 24-hour working, the following measures will be implemented to minimise the potential impacts to birds:

- Lighting on-board the survey vessel(s) will be kept to the minimum level required to ensure safe operations; and
- Lights will be directed or shielded to prevent upward illumination and minimise disturbance; and
- Blackout blinds and/or curtains will be used where possible when working in the vicinity of marine SPAs.

## 4. Basking Sharks

### 4.1. M8 – Basking Shark Monitoring

As outlined in Section 2.1, there will be MMO coverage for the duration of the SBP and UHRS activities, with adequately trained and experienced MMO(s) working standard 12-hour shifts. The MMO will also monitor for the presence of basking shark following the mitigation measures described above for marine mammal monitoring (see Section 2.2). Should any basking sharks be detected within 500 m of the vessel prior to the commencement of SBP or UHRS surveys (or after breaks in geophysical survey activity of more than 10 minutes), operations will be delayed until their passage, or the transit of the vessel, results in the animals being out-with the mitigation zone. In all cases, there will be a 20-minute delay from the time of the last sighting within the mitigation zone to the commencement/recommencement of the operations.

### 4.2. M9 – Basking Shark Mitigation Zone

During UHRS and SBP surveys, the MMO will monitor for the presence of basking sharks, in addition to marine mammals and otters, and will delay start of the survey if any are seen within 500 m of the survey vessel. The mitigation zone for basking sharks may be reduced from 500 m to 200 m in the event of a need to avoid critical delay to the project subject to agreement with MD-LOT.

## 5. Otters

### 5.1. M10 – Otter Monitoring

There will be MMO coverage for the duration of the UHRS and SBP survey operations, with adequately trained and experienced MMO(s) working standard 12-hour shifts. The MMO will also monitor for the presence of otters (see also Section 2.2).

### 5.2. M11 – Otter Mitigation Zone

When conducting UHRS and SBP surveys, the MMO will monitor for the presence of otters in the water in addition to marine mammals and basking sharks and delay the start of the survey if any are seen within 200 m of the survey vessel.

## 6. Benthic

### 6.1. M12 – Avoidance of Sensitive Benthic Features (Where Practical) for Geotechnical Survey Activities

For all geotechnical survey activities, known sensitive seabed features of benthic habitats will be avoided where practical, including protected features of relevant NCMPPAs, informed by previous DDV and ROV inspection.

### 6.2. M13 – DDV / ROV Inspection Prior to Benthic Grab Sampling

DDV/ROV inspection will be conducted prior to benthic grab sampling. If any sensitive features and habitats are identified, these will be avoided. Seabed visual transects will instead be conducted at locations which are identified as unsuitable for grab sampling.

## 7. References

JNCC (2017). JNCC guidelines for minimising the risk of injury and disturbance to marine mammals from geophysical surveys. April 2017.

SNH (2017). The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code. SNH Guidance.

The Shark Trust (2024). Basking Shark Code of Conduct.