



# New proposal will restore over 1000 hectares of Flow Country peatland

**T**HE Flow Country in Caithness and Sutherland is the largest expanse of blanket bog in Europe, covering about 400,000 hectares, and is of significant natural importance. In the late 1970s and '80s, many thousand hectares of it was converted to commercial forestry due to government support at the time. The resulting ploughing and drainage severely modified the bog. The trees dried out the peat and changed the habitat – not just degrading the peatland but also severely affecting local wildlife.

Under a proposal put forth by SSE, in consultation with a number of key stakeholders including the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, large sections of the area will have the trees removed and water levels restored as part of the

development of the Strathly South wind farm.

The Strathly South wind farm, located approximately 12km south of Strathly village, is designed to sit in an area currently blanketed by conifer forests. Of the 1133-hectare plantation, the wind farm will make use of less than 100 hectares, and over 1000 hectares will be restored to peatland habitats. Some of the original forest tracks across peatland will also be removed.

The project will be one of the largest peatland restoration projects under way in the Flow Country and, alongside its important role in restoring a very large area of degraded peatland, it will offer a wide range of additional environmental and local economic benefits.

Once the wind farm's life cycle is over it will be removed, enabling the final

**The Strathly South wind farm is an example of how wind farm development can not only create renewable energy but also help the local environment**

**Nicki Small, SSE**

phase of restoration to be completed. With the current level of funding available due to pressure on public sector spending and other resources, it is unlikely this area of Flow Country will be restored within the timescale of the wind farm's operation.

The removal of unwanted conifer plantations on sensitive peatland areas of the Flow Country will add many acres of bog to full health. The potential return of a thousand hectares of peatland at Strathly South included in the wind-farm application would be a major step change in the health of our greatest deep peat bogs.

**A**LTHOUGH there is new funding being made available for some peatland restoration, it is only a very small fraction of what is needed. This is particularly the case given that other sources of funding, such as agri-environment schemes and Scottish Natural Heritage grants, are decreasing and demands for conservation resources are so great.

The extent of forest plantation in the Flow Country is estimated at 60,000 hectares and, based on some estimates, the cost of crop compensation, harvesting and restoration management could amount to £480 million.

A significant amount of environmental survey work has already been carried out over the past 10 years, during which time SSE has commissioned comprehensive ecological, peat, bird and other studies and consulted with



**Natural habitat on the left next to an area of commercial forest on the right. This is one of the areas that will be restored as part of the Strathly South project.**

stakeholders to ensure that a thorough knowledge of the site's characteristics underpins the Strathly South project. Over 2400 peat probes, for example, have been completed to inform the wind farm's layout and restoration plans.

Taking into account the survey and other key concerns, the Strathly South proposal amounts to a substantial environmental gain.

SSE project manager Nicki Small said: "It has been suggested recently, mostly notably by the RSPB, that the Strathly South proposal is a threat to the local wildlife which is why dialogue between all parties must continue. The fact remains that under today's Forestry Commission standards the area would never have been approved for

commercial forestry so we need to work together to restore this magnificent area back to its original state.

"The Strathly South wind farm presents a pragmatic approach to the accelerated restoration of the peatlands and is an example of how wind-farm development can not only create renewable energy but also help the local environment.

"The global importance of the peatland habitat in the Flow Country as well as the importance of preventing further deterioration of the carbon-rich soils as part of the country's response to climate change should not be underestimated. The net gain from the proposal brings significant benefits to the environment, not to mention the Highland economy."



**Strathly South site boundary.**