

Environmental and Social Data Sheet

Overview

Project Name:	Oweninny Onshore Wind Farm Phase 2
Project Number:	2020-0396
Country:	Ireland
Project Description:	Construction and operation of an onshore wind farm with a total capacity of 83 MW in county Mayo, Ireland
EIA required:	yes
Project included in Carbon Footprint Exercise ¹ :	yes
(details for projects included are provided in section: "EIB Carbon Footprint Exercise")	

Environmental and Social Assessment

Environmental Assessment

The project comprises the development, installation and operation of an onshore wind farm consisting of 31 wind turbines, located in Mayo County in the northwest of Ireland. It is the second phase of a larger development with up to 112 turbines in total. The first phase (Oweninny 1) has been co-financed by the EIB and reached full Commercial Operation in November 2019.

The turbines have a unit capacity of 3.2 MW, a rotor diameter of 117m and total height of 176m, which is just within the limitations set by the planning permit. The total energy export is limited to 83 MW through the grid connection agreement. The turbines will connect through underground radial feeders to the existing shared project substation, which has been built as part of the phase 1, together with 110 kV export cable of about 3 km.

Wind farms fall under Annex II of Directive 2014/52/EU amending the EIA Directive 2011/92/EU. It is therefore up to the Member State's competent authority to judge whether an individual wind farm requires an EIA or not, based on criteria defined in Annex III of the EIA Directive.

Given its overall size, the project was screened-in and a full environmental impact assessment was carried out by the competent authority (which is An Bord Pleanála (ABP) for projects, which are considered as Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID)). The EIA process had covered the wind farm phase 1 and phase 2 together, as well as the grid connection. The planning permit for 61 turbines was granted in June 2016 and amended in 2017 and 2020 due to modifications in the grid connection (underground cable and shared substation).

¹ Only projects that meet the scope of the Carbon Footprint Exercise, as defined in the EIB Carbon Footprint Methodologies, are included, provided estimated emissions exceed the methodology thresholds: 20,000 tonnes CO₂e/year absolute (gross) or 20,000 tonnes CO₂e/year relative (net) – both increases and savings.

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Following a screening process of about 15 Natura 2000 sites in the surrounding of 15 km to the project, ABP carried out an appropriate assessment for Bellacorick Iron Flush SAC (000466), Bellacorick Bog Complex SAC (001922), Owenduff/Nephin Complex SAC (000534), River Moy SAC (002298) and Carrowmore Lake Complex SAC (000476). It concluded that the project, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, would not adversely affect the integrity of the above Natura 2000 sites, in view of the conservation objectives of those sites.

The site was formerly used for peat harvesting for the Bellacorick power station. It comprises mainly cutaway bog land with remaining intact bog blankets and some reforested areas. Some of the bog sites enjoy particular protection as (candidate) Special Areas of Conservation and are excluded from the project site. A detailed peat stability risk assessment was performed, which concluded that due to the relatively flat, drained and cutaway nature of the site, peat stability risk is limited to particular areas within site. The layout avoids construction in such areas to minimise peat stability risks.

Major ecological characteristics of the sites including rare and protected plant species depend on the particular hydrological condition and the iron rich underground flows. To avoid or limit disturbance of these flows, pile foundations are considered.

The open peatland is a habitat of some species listed in the Annex of the EU Habitats directive and/or the Irish Red List and classified as near threatened, such as Otter, Pine Marten and Irish Hare, Leisler's Bat or Common Lizard. However, they are considered unlikely to be affected by the project. A total of 29 bird species of mainly medium conservation concern in Ireland were observed during a detailed ornithological study at the site but in small numbers only. To avoid negative impacts, the wind farm layout excludes areas rated as of ecological importance, especially remaining intact bog area or breeding and roosting sites.

Noise levels resulting from the operation of the turbines were calculated, concluding that the limits as set in the Planning Guidance by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government are respected at the noise sensitive locations. To reach this, some of the turbines will operate at a noise reduced power mode under certain wind conditions. Operational noise monitoring is required under the permit. (Monitoring for the first phase has already confirmed compliance)

A shadow flicker modelling suggests that 5 turbines may cause shadow flicker occurrence above the recommended limits at nearby dwellings. Therefore the planning permit requires further flicker monitoring during operation. Where necessary, flicker control systems shall be installed at the turbines.

To avoid disturbance and visual impact to the nearby housing, all power lines line will be realised as underground cable.

EIB Carbon Footprint Exercise

The direct CO₂ equivalent emissions of the wind farms are considered negligible.

In accordance with the Bank's current Carbon Footprint methodology it is calculated that based on the avoidance of electricity generation from a combination of existing and new power plants in Ireland, the total relative effect of the project is a net reduction in CO₂ equivalent emissions 102.3 kt CO₂e/yr.

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For the annual accounting purposes of the EIB Carbon Footprint, the project emissions will be prorated according to the EIB lending amount signed in that year, as a proportion of project cost.

Social Assessment, where applicable

The wind farm site is owned by a promoter group company. As a former peat harvesting site, the land is not well suited for agricultural activities, no physical or economic displacement took place.

The overall region is sparsely populated with little economic activities. Tourism is a significant income factor in the area. To create new points of touristic interest, a visitor centre is being established, providing insight into the history of power generation, peat production, wind energy development, bog rehabilitation and the social history of the area. In addition, it shall serve as a facility for community activities.

Public Consultation and Stakeholder Engagement

Throughout the project development and permitting process the local officials and residents as well as the general public were informed on the project through announcements, meetings and information booklets. Consultation meetings have taken place with the concerned authorities and interest groups such as National Parks and Wildlife Service, Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI), National Trust for Ireland, Mayo County Council, the Irish Peatland Conservation Council and telecommunication companies. Public consultations were held in two communities. Key issues during the public consultations were employment opportunities for the local population and community benefits from the project.

Two judicial review applications against the planning permit had been lodged of which the first was withdrawn prior to hearing and the second was rejected by the competent court. Already prior to phase 1 the promoter has established community liaison mechanisms and is actively managing potential upcoming issues with near neighbors and communities.

As required under the Irish Renewable Electricity Support Scheme, the project has to establish a Community Benefit Fund and to contribute 2 €/MWh produced during the RESS period. This fund will support community initiatives (preferably those related to the UN SDG, including education, energy efficiency or climate action).

Other Environmental and Social Aspects

The planning permit requires the promoter to decommission the turbines within one year after the end of operation, to remove the decommissioned material and to reinstate the site. To secure the reinstatement of the site, the project also has to provide a decommissioning guaranty to the Mayo County Council. While the largest part of the turbine consists of easily recyclable metal, the different methods for recycling, reuse or repurpose of the rotor blades are still in an early phase of development or testing. So far, Ireland has no rules for blade recycling.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the information available and subject to the conditions as defined in the planning permit, the project is acceptable for Bank financing.