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Consents given under the Petroleum Act 1998 and Reviews under the Assessment of Environmental Effects Regulations 1999

Basil Appraisal Well Block 12/21c

Ithaca Energy (UK) Ltd. (Ithaca) intend to drill an appraisal well in block 12/21c into the Basil Prospect in order to prove the existence of commercial volumes of oil. The well is located in the Moray Firth, approximately 19Km from Lybster off the East Caithness coast, with the nearest international boundary being the UK/Norwegian Median Line some 263 Km distance. The proposed well is situated about 11 Km to the north east of the Beatrice field, on the north-west edge of Smith Bank, in water depths of approximately 40m.

The well will be drilled using a jack up rig, with a combination of water based mud (WBM) and low toxicity oil based mud (LTOBM). A slim hole design has been chosen for the well with a 36" section, 17.5" section and a 12.25" section. WBM will be used to drill the top two sections, with 453 tonnes of cuttings discharged to sea and 252 tonnes of LTOBM cuttings will be generated from the lower section. The LTOBM cuttings will be contained and shipped to shore for treatment and disposal. The works are programmed to commence in March 2007 and last for approximately 38 days.

The proposed drilling period (March & possibly extending into April) co-incides with the spawning periods of cod, lemon sole (April), nephrops, and plaice (March). Seabird vulnerability to surface pollution in block 12/21c and the surrounding area is very high throughout the year, although March is prior to the start of the breeding season when seabirds return to their colonies.

The well will be evaluated by logging and coring, not by undertaking a well test, so there will be no flaring of hydrocarbons. The drilling of the well will result approximately 3,462 tonnes of CO² being emitted. If the well is successful, it will be suspended for potential re-use as a production well and a fishing friendly structure installed. If the well is not proved, it will be abandoned.

A number of environmental interactions were identified as being of potential significance and were considered further:-

- Atmospheric emissions
- Physical presence & disturbance
- Drilling
- Noise
- Accidental events

Habitats/Environmental Sensitivities:

The Moray Firth and surrounding coastline is of year round importance for birds and there are a number of coastal and marine SAC's, SPA's and Ramsar sites in the vicinity of the Moray Firth Area. Sites and species of known or potential conservation importance were considered as receptors in the process of assessing potential effects of the proposed appraisal well. This assessment identified only hydrocarbon spillage as having a theoretical interaction with Natura 2000 sites. However taking account of the probabilities and mitigation, it is concluded that significant effects on the integrity of these sites are not expected.

Public Consultation:

Comments were received from the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) as a result of the 28 day consultation period. Further information was requested from the operator and having considered the Operators response and the additional advice given by our nature conservation advisors, we are content that these issues have been addressed.

Conclusions

Following consultation, and the provision of further information on the 13 February 2006 in response to comments received at the public consultation stage, we are satisfied that the project is unlikely to have a significant environmental impact. In particular, we are content that it will not have a significant adverse effect on the marine environment in general or on any protected sites or species covered by the 'Habitats Regulations.'

Recommendation

On the 01 March 2007 Ithaca Energy (UK) Ltd. were advised that the Department required no further information with regard to the ES and it was recommended to the Licensing and Consents Unit of the DTI that the appraisal well be granted consent.

