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

Conoco

BLOCK 132/06a

Pursuant to Regulation 5(8) of the above Regulations, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry gives notice that, being content that the requirements of the above Regulations have been satisfied, he has, pursuant to Licence P953, granted a consent to Conoco U.K. Limited to the getting of petroleum and the drilling of an exploration well in Block 132/06a (hereafter referred to as "the project") subject to Conoco U.K. Limited conducting operations in respect of the project in accordance with the relevant environmental statement. The consent for the well was given on 26/03/01.

Background

Conoco (U.K.) Ltd (CUKL) proposes to drill a single exploration well in their Tranche 21 licence area, located in the Atlantic waters to the west of the Hebrides. The well will be located within a 2km radius of position 56o45'46"N, 09o50'38"W, in a water depth of about 1,920 metres, some 135 km from nearest land. CUKL plans to start drilling the well in May 2001. After considering various drilling options, because of the deep-water location CUKL proposes employing a dynamically positioned ultra deep water drillship, using water-based muds for all hole sections. The ES presents a comprehensive review of available environmental information of this deep-water region west of the Hebrides. On completion of drilling, the well will be evaluated and then either suspended or abandoned. No well testing activities will be undertaken. If the well is to be abandoned this will involve cutting the well casings to a minimum depth of c.3metres below the seabed, followed by debris clearance survey.

Environmental Sensitivities and Impacts

Four activities were identified as presenting the risk of potential impact and were assessed in more detail in the ES:

- discharge of drilling mud and cuttings;
- atmospheric emissions from power generation;
- noise associated with drilling operations.
- accidental spillage of hydrocarbons;

With reference to the discharge of drilling mud and cuttings the mud chemicals fall mainly into HOCNS Group E, with some 84% of the total mud chemical usage being PLONOR List Substances. Cuttings from the two top hole sections will be deposited immediately adjacent to the well, resulting in a small (25-40 metre cuttings pile (average thickness of about 30mm). Cuttings dispersion modelling suggests rapid dispersion in the deep waters, resulting in no expected impact beyond the immediate top-hole cuttings pile.

Atmospheric emissions are expected to be within routine drilling rig operational standards, with estimated emissions presented in the ES for drilling and support operations. The potential impact of noise from drilling operations on cetacean activities within the area is likely to be perceived as a significant issue by some. The

ES discusses noise generation and potential impacts and places emphasis on the short-term nature of the drilling operation. No significant impact on cetacean activities, notably migration was identified. The ES identifies that the most likely spill risk arises from bunkering but states that spills of a light distillate fuel oil would disperse extremely rapidly, with 'negligible' environmental impact. In addressing the risk of a blow-out, CUKL cites low probability based on drilling experience to date on the UKCS. After a request by DTI,

Conoco provided more adequate information regarding the basis to the selection of the drill-ship and its assessment of potential risks from the use of the vessel for drilling well 132/06-A particularly in relation to oil spill risk.

No significant impact was identified with both JNCC and FRS agreeing. The drilling of this well is unlikely to impact and future potential SAC.

Recommendation

Overall the environmental statement is satisfactory and adequately assesses the potential environmental impacts of the proposed development. Recommend that consent be given.