



NOT COUL PRESS RELEASE 6 June 2018

NOT COUL EVIDENCE DEFERS HIGHLAND COUNCIL DECISION ON COUL LINKS GOLF PROPOSAL

Highland Council's North Planning Applications Committee has decided to DEFER a decision on the Coul Links golf application, following a request by the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) for more time to consider new information.

In assessing the risk of direct and indirect destruction and damage from the proposed Coul golf course, SEPA and SNH are reliant on the developer submitting *accurate* habitat and hydrological information for Coul Links.

Dr Tom Dargie, chair of *Not Coul* said: "*Not Coul's* empirically based evidence shows that the applicant's habitat work and hydrological assessment are seriously deficient. The applicant's habitat survey has inexplicably missed significant areas of wetland that would be under the golf footprint.

"As a result, the impacts on wetland habitat - for example, habitat destruction and wider effects from fertilisers - could be much worse than SEPA had been led to believe *by the applicant*. It is possible that SEPA could decide to return with an objection to this application."

Yesterday, SEPA staff informed the planning committee meeting that Highland Council had consulted with SEPA on the 29th May. *Not Coul's* habitat and hydrology evidence differs substantially from information submitted by the developer in September 2017 and February 2018. SEPA needs time to understand those differences, assess which source is correct and perhaps review the SEPA position on the golf course development. It had asked the applicant to comment on the *Not Coul* material but the response was only received on 4th June.

Fundamentally, the hydrological model was inapplicable to one *half* of the Coul Links site. This omission is not explained. The *Not Coul* submission on hydrology also draws attention to peer-reviewed UK dune wetland scientific research between 2014 and 2018. That has confirmed 2010 Environment Agency precautionary advice that dune slacks are extremely sensitive assets and easily harmed by even very low nitrate concentrations."

The Coul wetlands already appear to be at the limit of "no damage" from excessive nitrate. Any further addition from golf fertilisers is likely to produce extensive harm to the Coul dune slacks, as well as adjacent dry grassland and dune heath which are affected by plant nutrients in the summer watertable.

Dr Dargie continued: "The importance of all this was made clear last month when Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for the Environment confirmed that the Ramsar designation covering Coul Links should be assessed *in the same way* as the very stringent *Habitats Regulations*. These derive from the Habitats Directive, a well understood and long established legislative framework for the protection and conservation of important flora and fauna right across the EU. **This is the highest possible level of protection. That means adverse environmental impacts must be ruled out before permission can be granted. For a Ramsar site that means no harm (i.e. no habitat loss and no risk of adverse fertiliser impacts).**"

“We hope that councillors will listen to SEPA’s response. The councillors who spoke in support yesterday seemed to be under the impression that the environmental damage would be limited to the 7% ‘direct impacts’. And that there are no other options for the future environmental management of the site. This was despite SNH clearly explaining earlier in the meeting that both of these points are just plain wrong.”

Not Coul's Further Objection to The Highland Council was submitted on 21st May 2018. It was not made available to the public until 29th May, following an email request, although naturally a copy was sent right away to the applicant SNH, SEPA and Dornoch Area Community Council. This was four days before the legal deadline for comments and was (we emphasise) not a late submission of information.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- Not Coul is an unincorporated group of Third Party objectors, opposing September 2017 plans for an 18-hole golf course on the site (Highland Council application reference 17/04601/FUL) by a group of developers led by US business people Mike Keiser and Todd Warnock, and including the Coul Links landowner and Embo Trust.

- Coul Links is a stretch of coastline in East Sutherland, north of the village of Embo. Exceptionally, it is protected for its rare dune habitats and wildlife by national (Site of Special Scientific Interest), European (Special Protection Area) and international (Ramsar) designations.

- Coul Links is home to more than 1,200 species including the extremely rare Fonseca's Seed Fly, which is restricted worldwide to this stretch of coastline.

- Scottish Natural Heritage and a group of organisations, including RSPB Scotland, The Scottish Wildlife Trust and National Trust for Scotland, have all objected to the proposal on the basis that it runs contrary to all the designations, Scottish Planning Policy (SPP), and the Local Development Plan, by materially compromising the environmental integrity of the site.

- The applicant claims that "less than 2%" of the site will be affected and that mitigation measures will lead to biodiversity net gain. That is completely contradicted, and seen as impossible, given the site’s assets. Coul Links is part of the large Loch Fleet SSSI which is 80% tidal mud and sand. In fact, the impact on land habitat is very large indeed, and analysis by Scottish Natural Heritage shows extensive loss of dune heath, dune grassland and dune wetland would occur. SNH also considers that mitigation measures will be largely ineffective, having stated in November 2017 that "adverse impacts will still greatly outweigh any benefits for the sand dune habitat". That advice was repeated yesterday, and remains sound.

Further information:

<http://www.notcoul.com/home.html>

<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/conserves-coul-links-for-nature-not-golf-1>

Attachments:

- Not Coul evidence on inadequate habitat and hydrology work
- Email evidence of Not Coul dates for submission and request to be made public.
- Image (no photo credit required)

Please direct all press enquires and requests for comment to Not Coul:

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