Key Issues

An understanding of the baseline conditions occupies a pivotal place in the EIA process. Article 5 of the EIA Directive states that:

“... information to be provided by the developer ... shall include at least ... the data required to identify and assess the main effects which the project is likely to have on the environment”.

Frequently, however, collection of baseline data is not given a high enough priority. This can result in costly delays.

This case study focuses on the need to construct a robust **ecological baseline**, to inform:

- the impacts of development;
- the mitigation required to offset the predicted impacts; and
- monitoring of the biophysical changes following project implementation.

Purpose of the project

Erection of wind turbines at The Bristol Port Company (TBPC) - Phase 1 (operational) and Phase 2 (consented) - to support delivery of the Government’s sustainability agenda and allow TBPC to fulfil its statutory obligations to provide port and harbour facilities from a renewable source of energy.

Description of the project

Three 3MW wind turbines were installed at Avonmouth Docks in 2007 and a further three turbines consented in 2010. The turbines are located in close proximity to the Severn Estuary SPA, raising the possibility of potential impacts on overwintering and breeding shorebirds. As well as carrying out an EIA, the client was required to provide data and analysis to inform an Appropriate Assessment under the EC Habitats Directive.
Lessons learnt

Throughout the project, the need for a clear and accurate evidence base needs to be at the forefront of the project management process. In particular:

- data collection should start as early as possible, in some cases immediately following (or even before) formal project inception;
- developers need to be realistic about how long it may take to collect the required data, especially if fresh field data acquisition is required (TBPC was required to collect ornithological data over two winters);
- scoping should help to identify the precise data requirements, but these may change as the project develops, so keep this under review;
- baseline data should be collected in accordance with specified (best practice) guidelines, with the limitations of any data on which the EIA relies being clearly highlighted;

- as part of the scoping process, there is a need to consult widely with technical experts to ensure there are no potential information gaps (TBPC consulted with RSPB, Natural England and other local organisations);
- collection of baseline data should be designed to satisfy the information requirements of the EIA analysis in predicting the effects of the proposed project … do not collect irrelevant or superficial data, as this ‘investment’ in time and money will be wasted; and
- finally, consider how information from secondary sources could be used to enhance and/or substitute fresh data collection.

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