

Plaid Cymru call – drop the Mega-barrage

from Chris Franks AM South Wales Central
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In my capacity as an elected Assembly Member for the South Wales Central region, I would like to make my views known to the current stage of the joint consultation exercise between the Department of Energy and Climate Change, Welsh Assembly Government and other agencies.

I believe that the feasibility study is currently including the correct grounds on which to move towards a future decision on developing tidal energy in the Severn Estuary. A balanced approach looking at climate change, the need to reduce carbon emissions, the importance of the needs of the local community and the obligation to protect the environment and wildlife is essential. The feasibility study should particularly focus on the impact of any tidal power scheme on the lives of local people on either side of the Estuary, as failure to do so could jeopardise action against climate change.

I support the provision of £500,000 to develop innovative and emerging technologies. Because of the unique nature of the tidal range and tidal stream in the Estuary, it is important that we view the area as a long-term source of huge amounts of clean and renewable energy. The continuous use of the Estuary for renewable energy would seem likely to involve a range of different technologies far beyond the lifetime of this current consultation exercise and possibly beyond the lifetime of the options described in the short list.

I have severe concerns over the inclusion of a Cardiff-Weston Barrage in the short list of options for tidal energy. The likely level of damage to bird and marine life from a Cardiff-Weston Barrage would appear to go far beyond any acceptable boundaries. The Shoots Barrage option would incur a more reasonable disruption to wildlife in exchange for generating renewable energy. The significant construction process for a Cardiff-Weston Barrage would be extremely disruptive to people living in the region I represent. Furthermore, it would result in the character of south-eastern Vale of Glamorgan changing from a semi-rural setting to that of a heavily developed region.

Responding to climate change also means that projects should be delivered as quickly as possible. Although the emissions generated by construction of the Cardiff-Weston Barrage may be quickly negated by the resultant clean energy, the timescale of constructing a Barrage when compared to the other options means that it cannot be considered a timely response to the climate crisis.

Finally, at this stage of the consultation exercise I would like to convey feelings from the ground and the local community. In my role as an Assembly Member I have organised a highly successful public meeting to discuss the various options. The concerns around the Cardiff-Weston Barrage were significant and similar to the concerns I am expressing. It is worth noting that at the meeting there was general support for developing a tidal energy project or several tidal energy projects, but that the Cardiff-Weston Barrage as a project had various flaws including time to construct, ongoing costs, environmental and negative impacts on wildlife, and disruption to the local community. There was also displeasure at the prospect of the revenue from the Barrage reverting to London, with no obvious benefit to Wales or to South Wales. In comparison, the Shoots Barrage, which could benefit the South Wales economy by accommodating a high-speed rail link, did not receive any such opposition.