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Further Reading:

Windemer, R. Considering time in land use planning: an assessment of end-of-life decision making for onshore wind. *Land Use Policy* (under review).

Rebecca Windemer is a visiting researcher with the Environment, Development and Sustainability Cluster in November and December 2018 and this policy brief is just one output from her research stay in NUI Galway.

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End-of-life considerations for onshore wind in Ireland

Most Irish wind farms have been granted a time-limited, 20 year, planning consent with a requirement to subsequently decommission. However, in the context of renewable energy targets, increasing pressure on land and opposition facing new sites, it will be important for existing sites to retain their license to operate. This could be achieved through extending the existing planning permission (life extension) or through getting permission for new, more efficient turbines on the site (repowering). This research used policy analysis and in-depth interviews to investigate the age of the infrastructure, the policy context and end-of-life challenges facing the sector.

Results

The oldest windfarms in Ireland are starting to approach the end of their consented life. Based on sites making end-of-life decisions at 20 years old, 79 sites are expected to make an end-of-life decision within the next 10 years with 26 of these decisions expected within the next 5 years. Experience elsewhere suggests that decisions are likely to be taken earlier, particularly in cases where infrastructure cannot be repaired, is inefficient or where the planning process is slow. There is thus a possibility that the number of sites making decisions within the next 5-10 years may be even greater. While repowering has not yet occurred in Ireland and life extension has only occurred in a small number of instances, developers are beginning to consider their options. Significantly, there is industry concern regarding the future of sites on land that has received EU-level nature designations. However, so far there has been limited policy consideration of repowering or life extension. While the potential for repowering is identified there is a lack of consideration regarding what would be required as part of an application or how it should be assessed. Additionally, decommissioning has been given little attention with many existing sites having inadequate requirements and no financial bonds in place. Repowering or life extension may provide an opportunity to improve decommissioning plans.

Policy Implications

In the context of EU targets for renewable generation it will be important that existing sites are not removed at the end of their permitted life. In this context, repowering also provides an opportunity to significantly increase output. The current lack of policy is likely to cause challenges for both developers and decision makers. In order to provide confidence to the sector Ireland needs to set out its position, there needs to be consideration of how applications should be considered and supported, and particular attention to sites that are now subject to EU nature designations. Moving forward, the Scottish Onshore Wind policy statement may provide a good exemplar, as it clearly sets out their position on repowering and how applications should be assessed, including consideration of the opportunities repowering can provide.