

Oil platform question still confused

by Eleanor Lawrence

THE British government has finally decided that some sort of planning policy is necessary to solve the vexed question of where in Scotland to build concrete gravity-type oil production platforms. But the statement may raise more problems than it solves.

Mr Eric Varley, Secretary of State for Energy, proposes that a limited number of future sites should be taken into public ownership in order to:

- maximise their use
- avoid proliferation of sites
- ensure only the minimum amount of infrastructure (such as roads and housing) is built
- make sites available in good time for the best platform designs
- enable strict control to be exercised over the development and eventual restoration of the sites.

But Mr Varley also emphasises that normal planning controls and procedures will not be by-passed, and in this his proposals differ from those of the last government which proposed to short-circuit planning procedures but not to acquire the land.

It is difficult to see how these two requirements will marry happily. On the same day that Mr Varley made his statement, the Secretary of State for Scotland, Mr Willie Ross, announced the results of the Drumbuie enquiry. This has ended in a victory for the National Trust and the villagers amongst others, since Mowlem/Taylor Woodrow's application to build Condeep concrete gravity platforms at Drumbuie, on one of the most beautiful parts of the north-west coast of Scotland, was turned down on environmental grounds after a lengthy public enquiry.

The result of the Drumbuie enquiry has both heartened and confused the environmentalists. Mr Ross said in his statement that he was not persuaded that the possible national gains depended solely on the Condeep design which Mowlem/Taylor Woodrow wished to build. This design can only be constructed at the very deep water sites in that area. The fact that the Drumbuie land is owned by the National Trust was also an important factor in the decision, since even if permission had been granted, parliamentary approval would have been needed. But Mr Ross also said that the official Reporter for the enquiry had examined five other sites nearby and had concluded that all were, or might be, suitable. There is already an application by Howard/Doris to build gravity platforms at Loch Kishorn further up the coast; this has been approved in principle by the local authority and objections are being con-

sidered by Mr Ross at the moment.

What confuses environmentalists is that development anywhere in the area will potentially be equally as destructive as at Drumbuie, since other sites under consideration (such as on the Crowlin Islands in the strait between Skye and the mainland) are even more remote from road and rail communications and are so near Drumbuie that the same social objections can also be made. Mr Ross has refused a public enquiry at Loch Kishorn on these very grounds—that the objections are so similar that they need not be debated publicly once again.

Mr Ross has also said that his criteria for choosing a suitable site are

- that it must have access to existing facilities
- that it can draw on an existing labour source
- that it can make use of existing infrastructure such as roads and services

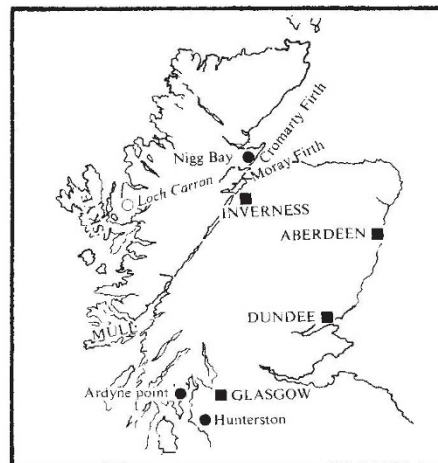
None of the Loch Carron area sites satisfies these criteria so the environmental groups opposing the Loch Kishorn application are hopeful.

But Mr Varley has put the Condeep platform design on his list of 'approved designs' for which he is willing to acquire sites. For his purposes, approved means most favoured by the oil companies. And the only place in Scotland that Condeep can be built is at one of the Loch Carron sites, which have exceptionally deep water close to a flat shore area.

For some time Condeep was thought to be the cheapest and best design for the deepwater oilfields but recent events have proved that this may not necessarily be so, and the image of Condeep as the saviour of the national economy is being challenged from several sides.

A spokesman for the Conservation Society said that as far as the Loch Carron area was concerned, Mr Varley's proposals were "irrelevant" because the society feels that the Condeep platforms are unnecessary. They point to the very successful French design which McAlpine is building at Ardyne Point on the Clyde near Glasgow. This Seatank platform can operate in 600 feet of water but unlike the Condeep does not need very deep water close to the building site, and can be towed some distance for final assembly.

Another blow to claims that the Condeep design is uniquely suitable for deepwater operations came when Shell ordered an Andoc concrete gravity platform for its deepest water site in the Dunlin field and Signal Oil chose a steel design for its Thistle field because seabed conditions proved unsuitable for gravity platforms. Diffi-



culties have also been experienced during the construction of Condeep platforms, at the time when the base is submerged. It was found that when submerged, one of the hollow base cells cracked under the water pressure and the design had to be modified so that the cells could be filled with concrete to overcome this.

Mr Varley's proposals could prove useful, however, in preserving the continuity of work at east coast sites. McDermott at Ardesier near Inverness has no more orders and the workforce faces redundancy as soon as present work is finished in a relatively short time. Mr Varley may find himself faced with the need to use his intended powers of restoration of the site and redeployment of the workforce sooner than he thinks. □

Infrared telescope for space shuttle

THE NASA Ames Research Center has awarded a \$400,000 contract to Hughes Aircraft Co. for a design study to be carried out for an infrared telescope which could be flown in the space shuttle. The contract specifies a pointing accuracy of 1', and is expected to have an aperture in the range 1 to 1.5 m, rather larger than the 36-inch instrument which is the main tool of NASA's existing flying observatory and is mounted in a C-141.

According to a report in *Aviation Week & Space Technology* (August 19), Michel Bader, deputy director of astronautics at Ames, describes the shuttle facility as "an extension of the C-141 programme"; but the new instrument will have cooled optics and detectors, as well as appropriate changes for zero-g operation and other problems specific to the shuttle.

Grumman Aerospace Corporation will be working with Hughes on some aspects of these problems, and the study will take at least a year. Work on the hardware may not begin until well into 1977. □