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Offshore income ‘belongs to Scots’

EXCLUSIVE: David Ross, Highland Correspondent

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Ministers in Edinburgh are preparing to legislate to ensure much of the fortune earned by the Crown Estate from the multi-billion-pound offshore energy industry goes to local communities in Scotland.

They believe it is unacceptable that the only public body that can earn income from offshore wind, wave and tidal power generation is the unelected guardian of the Crown’s rights and assets, which passes its revenues on to the Treasury.

The move by the Scottish Government comes after The Herald highlighted the possibility of the Crown Estate rights to the seabed being challenged by Holyrood, at a critical time when licences for renewable energy have massive financial potential.

Alex Salmond said this week of Scotland’s natural resources: “I believe that these belong, fundamentally, to the people of this land. We stand at the threshold of another energy revolution, in renewables, and we must ensure that the mistakes of the past, when the takings from North Sea oil and gas were siphoned off elsewhere, are not repeated.”

A spokesman for the First Minister yesterday expanded on ministerial thinking, revealing: “We are about to consult on legislation for the communities of Scotland to benefit from the exploitation of their natural resources, and clearly one issue where we wish to examine all options is the unsustainable position that the Crown Estate is the only public body that currently accrues a direct benefit from offshore development, with revenues going to the Treasury.

“There is a groundswell of opinion in Scotland for change, and we will shortly be consulting on ideas and legislative proposals.”

On Monday, Environment Secretary Richard Lochhead will meet the conveners of six Highland and Islands councils to discuss the Crown Estate.

Research published in May found that harnessing about one-third of Scotland’s total offshore resource could result in a net value in electricity sales of an estimated £14 billion.

Although the administration by the Crown Estate Commissioners is reserved to Westminster, in April a Commons Treasury Committee report underlined that Holyrood already had power

to “legislate over the extent and nature of Crown property rights in Scotland, legislate to regulate the use of land and property rights and issue guidance on standards of good management”.

Since then, calls have been growing for MSPs to act, and no voice has been louder than that of land reform campaigner Andy Wightman. He also wants Scottish Liberal Democrat MPs to use their new power in the Coalition Government to ensure that if or when Westminster passes a new Scotland Act to increase Holyrood’s powers, the administration and revenues of the Crown Estate are repatriated to Scotland.

He hailed Mr Salmond’s announcement yesterday, saying: “This is a very welcome development and will hopefully lead to a meaningful debate on the case for change. We now have a unique opportunity to bring all Crown property rights under the full control of the Scottish Parliament.”

Mr Lochhead has already held talks with Scottish Secretary Michael Moore to discuss accountability of the Crown Estate Commissioners in Scotland. He said: “I had a constructive meeting with the Secretary of State for Scotland, at which we agreed that greater transparency and accountability for the Crown Estate in Scotland was needed. We have agreed to work closely together on how this can be achieved. To help take this forward, the Scottish Government will be sharing a paper setting out our proposals on how this can be achieved.”

In response to the Scottish Government’s move, a spokesman for the Crown Estate Commissioners said: “This is a matter for the UK and Scottish governments.”

Hydro scheme in Easter Ross given approval

A hydro scheme near Ardross in Easter Ross that will power more than 9000 homes has been approved by ministers.

The 7.5 Megawatt (MW) Kildermorie scheme is the largest to be approved since the £140 million Glendoe scheme in the hills above Loch Ness was given the go-ahead five years ago.

Energy Minister Jim Mather said: “In capitalising on our greatest natural asset – our water – Scotland has long harnessed green energy from arguably the most successful hydro schemes in the world. This scheme follows in that proud tradition and is the largest to be consented in Scotland for five years.”