

UK government rejects current Severn barrage plans

[Fiona Harvey](#) First published on Wed 18 Sep 2013 08.04 EDT

Ministers say major changes must be made to the scheme if it is to be revived and given serious consideration

Plans for a tidal barrage generating power on the Severn estuary were dealt a further blow on Wednesday when the government ruled out proceeding on current plans.

However, ministers said if major changes were made to the scheme, with new environmental studies and reassurances over financing and technology, it could be revived and given serious consideration.

The [only current proposals for a barrage come from Hafren Power](#), which has the backing of the former Welsh secretary Peter Hain, which has said it can find financial backing for its technology.

But the government, in its response to [a June report from the environment and climate change select committee of MPs](#), said: "In its current form, the Hafren Power proposals for a Severn barrage does not demonstrate that it could deliver the benefits it claims it would achieve."

The June report from the influential committee of MPs found that the Hafren power was unworkable. The company disputed this, and chief executive, Tony Pryor, said at that time: "The report is unhelpful and frustrating – we all know we have a lot more work to do and we will do it. The government has already told us it is not against the barrage and we are determined to press ministers and officials to engage fully.

"We believe the environmental and economic issues can be solved with everyone working together. Unlike smaller schemes, only a barrage can harness the full power potential of the estuary and do it economically. It will also be much cheaper and last much longer than offshore windfarms which have high levels of public subsidy."

Hafren did not respond to requests for comment on Wednesday morning.

[Concerns over the impact of such a barrage on marine life](#) played a major part in the rejection, with the government agreeing with MPs that better studies were needed to establish the effects on fish.

The response was: "It is for the developers to do the necessary work to prove that their design is 'fish-friendly' and will not jeopardise the UK's obligations under the water framework directive and habitats directive. Such studies will need to take account of the wide variation in vulnerability of different fish species arising from their different morphology, physiology and behaviour."

The government said Hafren would need to provide much more detailed, credible evidence of the proposal, including a study of the environmental impacts and information on turbines, as well as information on allaying fears of flooding that could be worsened by any barrage. The coalition said it would consider the proposal further if this information was provided, but added that legal hurdles would mean the consortium's current proposals were likely to be subject to delay.

Ministers reiterated their view that there should be no firm commitments of public financial support – in the form of the "strike price" of a premium for low-carbon power that has been confirmed for wind power and is expected soon for nuclear energy – for tidal barrage schemes until 2019 at the earliest.

In its response, the government also cast doubt on Hafren's ability to raise the funds for its project. "To date, Hafren Power have not presented the government with compelling evidence of their likelihood of raising the necessary levels of finance," the response said.

But the response contained some crumbs of comfort for supporters of a barrage. The statement said: "The government recognises the strong energy and climate change benefits that a Severn barrage could bring. However these cannot come at any cost. There are many ways in which the UK could meet its decarbonisation targets ... There is a huge amount of potential energy in the Bristol Channel and it is only right that the government should be seeking the best ways of extracting it."

But as for alternative approaches, ministers were sceptical, saying it could take five to 10 years for a suitable turbine to be developed. "A smaller-scale tidal range scheme could in particular provide important information on the operation of the innovative turbines, which Hafren Power proposes to use. It is worth noting, however, that, given the considerable scale of a Cardiff-Weston type barrage and the unique environment of the Severn Estuary, a smaller-scale tidal range project would not necessarily provide wider evidence readily comparable to the type of impacts from a larger scheme."

Further studies would have to be undertaken by the private sector developers as there was no "strategic case for funding further studies to examine the potential of the region at the expense of taxpayers".

Several green groups welcomed the government's response. Kate Jennings of the RSPB said: "Once again, plans to build a Severn barrage have been effectively dismissed, described as 'hypothetical' and failing to demonstrate either effective mitigation of environmental impacts or value for money. This is fantastic news for the wildlife of the Severn, and a welcome blast of

common sense from the government. Conservationists have been warning for years that this poorly thought through project would devastate the ecosystem of this estuary, but it has somehow managed to stay on the table."

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