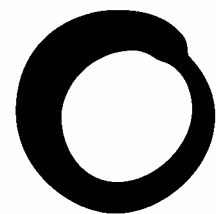


Briefing Note

Last chance for the Blackdown Hills?



Friends of the Earth

This month results are expected to be announced of a Highways Agency study of two different route options for the trunk road to the West Country. At stake is the future of the Blackdown Hills, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty on the Devon - Somerset border, and the final decision will be a key test of the Government's resolve to keep major transport projects out of protected areas.

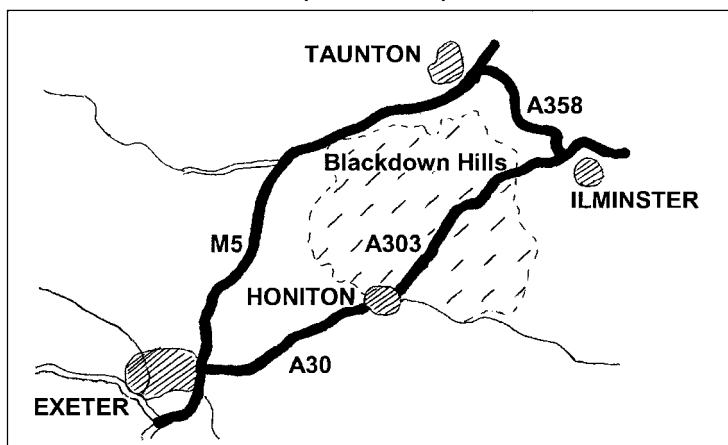
Background to the Study

The route was subject of a larger study (the South West Area Multi Modal Study, "SWARMMS"), after which the Secretary of State for Transport, Alistair Darling, approved the principle of a "second strategic road" to the West Country, in December 2002, but delayed a decision on the exact line to be taken by the road. The Highways Agency were instructed to compare two options, either the existing A303 through the Blackdown Hills, or using the A358 to join the M5 at Taunton (see map).

Both have significant drawbacks, but these are different in nature:

With the A303, the concern is primarily the devastating impact on the landscape, habitats and wildlife of nationally designated sites

With the A358, the issue is the worsening of an already serious traffic problem, and pressure for a new wave of car-reliant development, fuelling demands for yet more road building.



A303

The scale of damage to the natural environment threatened by the A303 option is spelled out in a recent briefing from English Nature (EN). EN are the Government's statutory advisers on wildlife. They "are certain that any proposal to upgrade the A303 to a dual carriageway will irretrievably damage the environment of the Blackdown Hills and the wildlife that depends on it."

EN point out that "The present line of the A303 passes through an area of major ecological

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importance, which is also designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It runs close to two SSSIs, three County Wildlife Sites and across or through two river valleys. Any works to the current road or along any route corridor will adversely affect all of these sites.”

Because of the steep hills and sharp bends on the existing road, upgrading it to dual carriageway would mean large scale engineering works cutting through the countryside. EN say that “Building a dual carriageway plus associated works will affect a corridor up to 600m wide.” At risk are woodlands, watercourses, flower-rich meadows and springs.



“The network of hedgerows dividing up the field system of the Blackdowns is a special feature of the area. Any proposal to dual the A303 will cut through nearly 200 such hedges.” Otters, bats and dormice would suffer from loss or severance of their natural habitat.

Overall, EN conclude, ***“It is our view that a dual carriageway through the Blackdown Hills will cause serious and permanent ecological damage to an area of high biodiversity and therefore represents an unsustainable solution, which contradicts current Government policy.”***

A358

EN also state that *“The environmental impacts of the alternative A358 are minor by comparison”*. These impacts would however be real. SWARMMS predicted a doubling of traffic over the present day (from 19,000 vehicles per day to 38,000 by 2016). Major new works would be required where the A358 joins the M5; at the time of SWARMMS the Highways Agency were concerned that the existing junction did not have sufficient capacity and at least one new junction would have to be built.

While twice as much traffic would pour up the widened A358, the most serious congestion occurs between the M5 and Taunton to the north. So far from enhancing access to Taunton, the SWARMMS/A358 strategy is likely to make it worse. It will however open up land and unleash very strong pressure for development around new motorway junction(s), likely to prove irresistible. The result would be a further dispersal of economic and social activity away from the historic town centre, leading to more car reliance, more congestion and more calls for road building. A northern and western ring road is already on the cards.

Weighing Up the Options

The option to dual the A358, while it causes damage and threatens severe knock-on effects, does not by itself threaten irreversible loss of nationally designated environmental assets; its impacts are not unique and not contrary to national policy guidance on transport. Given that the Secretary of State has determined to pursue one or the other, it should be the A358.

If that is what happens, however, what else should be done as well? Communities near to the A303 have long-standing concerns about accidents and severance. Diverting the principal route to Exeter away from the Blackdowns offers new opportunities to calm the existing road by means of speed limits and weight restrictions, and to make junctions safer and easier.

SWARMMS, like many other recent studies, concluded that just to expand roads would not be a solution to the transport problems of the South West. Better public transport and measures to reduce the growth in travel demand were needed as well. Unfortunately there is little sign of any such balance in the Government’s approach. Half a billion pounds’ worth of road widening schemes are now being promoted between Wiltshire and West Cornwall, while the Waterloo to Exeter railway line, running parallel to the A303 and partly reduced to single track in the 1960’s, receives nothing.