



Assessment, Research and Data Unit

Screening for Appropriate Assessment for a Maritime Usage Licence Application

To:	Maritime Authorisations Unit	From:	Dr Ciar O'Toole Senior Marine Advisor
Date	6 June 2025	Maritime Usage Licence Application No:	MUL240034
Applicant:	Gas Networks Ireland Limited		
Type of maritime usage activity in accordance with Schedule 7 of the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021:	<i>(3) Marine environmental surveys for the purposes of site investigation or in support of an application under Part XXI of the Act of 2000.</i>		
Location of proposed Maritime Usage:	Lower Shannon Estuary (2 locations)		
Licence application received:	9 September 2024		
RFI requested	Yes, on 26 May 2025. Response received on 5 June 2025		

Step 1 - Description of Project/Proposal and local site characteristics

Application Documents submitted

A number of documents were submitted by the applicant, Gas Networks Ireland Ltd., as part of their application for a Maritime Usage Licence (MUL). The documents referred to during this assessment include the MUL application form dated 6 September 2024, and the Supporting Information for Screening of Appropriate Assessment (SISAA) report dated 6 September 2024.

Brief description of the project and proposed work

The purpose of the proposed marine surveys is to assist the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) to identify locations suitable for development as a Strategic Gas Emergency Reserve.

The proposed studies will provide baseline data for any future environmental assessment should the development be taken forward to planning/consent stage. The proposed works will consist of the following: -

- Deployment and retrieval of static acoustic monitoring devices (SAM)
- Deployment and retrieval of Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP)

Each moored device is likely to consist of:

- two gravity-design mooring weights (circa 20 kg each)
- an acoustic release system
- one or two hydrophones (SAM devices) or one ADCP
- multiple subsurface buoys.

Proposed locations of the moored devices are shown in Figure 1. According to the submitted application, the ADCP devices will be required for between 4 weeks to 12 months per location, depending on data collected. Similarly, the SAM devices will be required for a period of 3 months to 2 years per location. The moored devices will be retrieved every 3 to 4 months for maintenance and data checking and then redeployed, if necessary, over a maximum of a two-year period. It is expected to take one day to retrieve and one day to deploy the equipment.

The proposed marine survey area consists of two distinct areas, Area A and Area B (Figure1). Area A extends the width of the Shannon Estuary from the townland of Ralappane to the townland Tarbert Island and covers an area of 1661.356 hectares. Area B extends across the Shannon Estuary from the townland of Foyne's Island to the townland of Ballynacragga, covering an area of 787.526 hectares. This gives a total combined area of 2448.89 hectares.

The vessel(s) to be used are not known at this stage but it is estimated that, at most, allowing for two years of data collection, maintenance and redeployment every three months will equate to a maximum of nine days of vessel activity per study area per year.

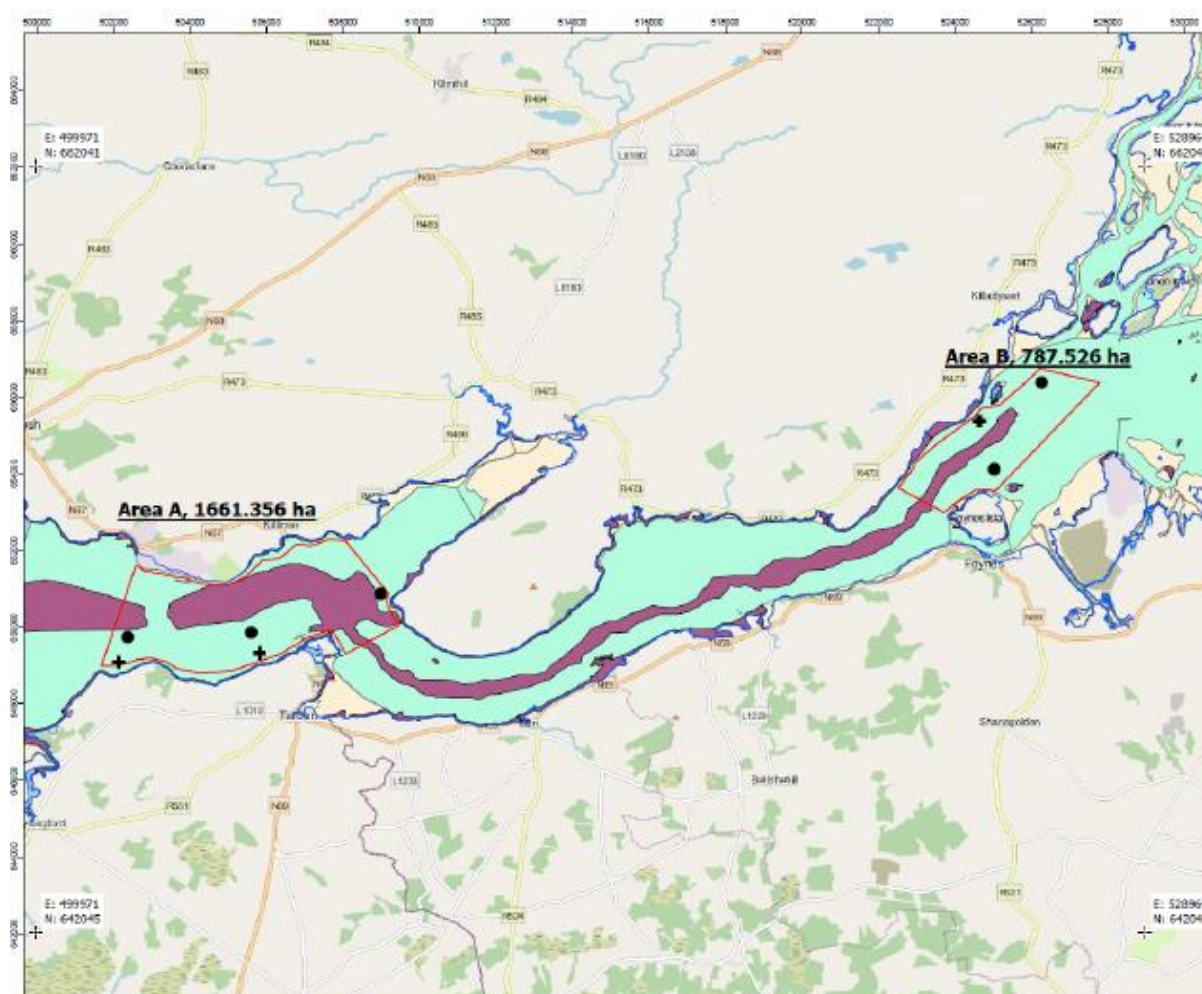


Figure 1: Proposed Maritime Usage Licence application areas outlined in red, with deployment locations for devices in black (cross indicates ADCP, filled circle indicates acoustic recorder and protected habitat type (Reefs [1170] in purple and Estuaries [1130] in green as submitted by the applicant.

Brief description of the site characteristics

The estuary is characterised by large areas of intertidal mudflats and fringing saltmarsh. The sediment in the area is largely coarse sand, with benthic fauna biodiversity increasing in more sheltered areas. The area has sheltered conditions and water depths ranging from the intertidal to around 50m below chart datum. The proposed MUL application areas overlap with qualifying interests in the Lower River Shannon SAC. The Shannon Estuary is also a busy commercial channel, with Shannon Foynes Port, Aughinish Alumina and Limerick Port.

Step 2 - Identification of relevant Natura 2000 sites using Source-Pathway-Receptor Model and compilation of information on qualifying interests and conservation objectives.

Table 1. European sites screened for appropriate assessment, their qualifying interests and site-specific conservation objectives. (Note: The Qualifying Interests indicated in **bold** have been screened in for appropriate assessment.

European Site Code	Distance from the Proposed Development (km)	List of Qualifying Interests	Connections (Source-Pathway Receptors)	Qualifying Interests considered further in Screening	European Site Screened in for Stage 2 AA	Site-specific conservation objectives
Lower River Shannon SAC [Site Code IE002165]	Within SAC boundary	Reefs [1170] Sandbanks which are slightly covered by sea water all the time [1110] Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide [1140] Coastal lagoons [1150] Large shallow inlets and bays [1160] Perennial vegetation of stony banks [1220] Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts [1230] Salicornia and other annuals colonising mud and sand [1310] Atlantic salt meadows (Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritima) [1330] Mediterranean salt meadows (Juncetalia maritimi) [1410]	No – while the proposed deployment location of moored devices overlaps with protected estuarine habitat, the method of mooring to be used and the small scale and short-term nature of the moorings themselves will not result in a significant impact	No	No	NPWS, 2012 Conservation Objectives: Lower River Shannon SAC 002165. Version 1.0. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

European Site Code	Distance from the Proposed Development (km)	List of Qualifying Interests	Connections (Source-Pathway Receptors)	Qualifying Interests considered further in Screening	European Site Screened in for Stage 2 AA	Site-specific conservation objectives
		<p>Water courses of plain to montane levels with the Ranunculion fluitantis and Callitriche-Batrachion vegetation [3260]</p> <p>Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils (Molinion caeruleae) [6410]</p> <p>Alluvial forests with Alnus glutinosa and Fraxinus excelsior (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae) [91E0]</p> <p>Estuaries [1130]</p> <p>Margaritifera margaritifera (Freshwater Pearl Mussel) [1029]</p> <p>Petromyzon marinus (Sea Lamprey) [1095]</p> <p>Lampetra planeri (Brook Lamprey) [1096]</p> <p>Lampetra fluviatilis (River Lamprey) [1099]</p> <p>Salmo salar (Salmon) [1106]</p> <p>Tursiops truncatus (Common Bottle-nose Dolphin) [1349]</p> <p>Lutra lutra (Otter) [1355]</p>	on the habitat type.			
Kerry Head Shoal SAC [Site code 002263]		Reefs [1170]	No – no link between activity and SAC or QI's	No	No	NPWS (2013) Conservation Objectives: Kerry Head Shoal SAC 002263. Version

European Site Code	Distance from the Proposed Development (km)	List of Qualifying Interests	Connections (Source-Pathway Receptors)	Qualifying Interests considered further in Screening	European Site Screened in for Stage 2 AA	Site-specific conservation objectives
						1. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.
River Shannon and River Foynes Estuaries SPA [Site code IE004077]	Within SPA boundary	<p>Cormorant (<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>) [A017] Whooper Swan (<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>) [A038] Light-bellied Brent Goose (<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>) [A046] Shelduck (<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>) [A048] Wigeon (<i>Anas penelope</i>) [A050] Teal (<i>Anas crecca</i>) [A052] Pintail (<i>Anas acuta</i>) [A054] Shoveler (<i>Anas clypeata</i>) [A056] Scaup (<i>Aythya marila</i>) [A062] Ringed Plover (<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>) [A137] Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>) [A140] Grey Plover (<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>) [A141] Lapwing (<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>) [A142] Knot (<i>Calidris canutus</i>) [A143] Dunlin (<i>Calidris alpina</i>) [A149] Black-tailed Godwit (<i>Limosa limosa</i>) [A156] Bar-tailed Godwit (<i>Limosa lapponica</i>) [A157]</p>	No – proposed Maritime Usage area overlaps with SPA, but it is a busy marine channel so the temporary addition of two small survey vessels over short time periods will not constitute significant disturbance to SCI species.	No	No	NPWS (2012) Conservation Objectives: River Shannon and River Fergus Estuaries SPA 004077. Version 1.0. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

European Site Code	Distance from the Proposed Development (km)	List of Qualifying Interests	Connections (Source-Pathway Receptors)	Qualifying Interests considered further in Screening	European Site Screened in for Stage 2 AA	Site-specific conservation objectives
		Curlew (<i>Numenius arquata</i>) [A160] Redshank (<i>Tringa totanus</i>) [A162] Greenshank (<i>Tringa nebularia</i>) [A164] Black-headed Gull (<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>) [A179] Wetland and Waterbirds [A999]				
Loop Head SPA [Site code 004119]		Kittiwake (<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>) [A188] Guillemot (<i>Uria aalge</i>) [A199]	No	No	No	NPWS (2025) Conservation Objectives: Loop Head SPA 004119. Version 1. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.
Kerry Head SPA [Site code 004182]		Fulmar (<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>) [A009] Chough (<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>) [A346]	No	No	No	NPWS (2025) Conservation Objectives: Kerry Head SPA 004189. Version 1. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Step 3 Assessment of likely significant effects

- (a) Identify all potential direct and indirect impacts that may have an effect on the conservation objectives of a European site, taking into account the size and scale of the project

Potential Impacts	Possible significance of Potential impacts (duration, magnitude, etc.)
None identified	None identified

In-combination effects

MARA has developed a stepwise approach for identifying other In-Combination plans and projects.

Using professional and scientific judgement, the key steps for assessing cumulative effects are as follows:

1. Defining the Cumulative Effects Spatial Scope (CESS)
2. Defining the Cumulative Effects Temporal Scope (CETS)
3. Impact identification
4. Pathway identification
5. Prediction
6. Identification of Plans or Projects that could act in combination
7. Screening Stage Cumulative Effects Assessment conclusion
8. Managing cumulative impacts - to be carried out as part of Stage 2 AA process

The CESS has been defined as the area of the proposed Maritime Area Usage (red-line boundary) and the CETS as 2 years. The definition of the CESS is based on the potential area impacted by in-combination activities based on the likely significant effects identified in Steps 2 and 3 of this screening, and the CETS is the proposed Maritime Usage Licence period.

Following a search of relevant databases undertaken on the 16 May 2025, the projects in Table 2 have been identified as potential in-combination projects.

The following plans, related to the development of the maritime environment were also identified:

- The Climate Action Plan 2025.
- The Water Action Plan 2024
- National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023-2027)
- Limerick County Development Plan (2022-2028)
- Clare County Development Plan (2023-2029)
- Strategic Integrated Framework Plan for the Shannon Estuary (2013-2020)

These plans promote sustainable development and integrated management planning in the maritime environment. It is unlikely that any of these plans will result in a negative in-combination effect on the conservation objectives of the Natura 2000 sites.

Likely significant in-combination effects between this project and the projects in Table 2 and above plans on the conservation objectives of Natura 2000 sites considered in this report can be excluded.

Table 2: List of projects considered for in-combination assessment.

Application reference	Project description	Approximate distance from MUL area	Project Status	Cumulative effects
Planning Permission application 18301561	Capacity Extension at Foynes Port	1 km	Approved but not completed - permission granted 12/12/2018	No spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
Planning Permission application 2360011	Shannon Foynes Port Development	1km	Proposed – permission submitted January 2023	No spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
Planning Permission application 22742	Shannon Foynes Port Development	1 km	Proposed – permission submitted July 2022	No spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
Foreshore Licence application FS006975	Shannon Foynes Port Company maintenance dredging	1 km	Approved but not completed - permission granted 03/03/2023	No spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
MUL application application LIC230014	Shannon Foynes Port Company	1 km	Granted October 2024	No spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
Dumping at Sea application S0009-03	Shannon Foynes Port Company Dumping at Sea Permit	1 km	Approved but not completed - permission granted 21/12/2020	No spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
MUL application LIC230004	Aughinish Maintenance Dredging	3.5 km	Granted April 2025	No spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
PA91.312146 and 318302	Aughinish Alumina Bauxite Extension	3.5km	Approved - permission granted 31/08/22	No Spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.
MAC application MAC10230032	NetZero Energy Project 4 Limited	2 km	Proposed MAC submitted	No Spatial overlap with Maritime Usage Licence Area. Possible temporal overlap.

Were mitigation measures considered during the screening process?

No

Step 4 Screening Determination Statement and Conclusion

The assessment of significant effects:

On the basis of the information on file, and having regard to:

- The nature and scale of the proposed development
- The distance to the nearest European sites


Having considered the legal framework applicable to Appropriate Assessment, it was concluded that the proposed maritime usage by Gas Networks Ireland to conduct marine surveys at 2 locations in the Shannon estuary (MUL240034) **will not** require Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment.

It can be excluded on the basis of objective scientific information, that the proposed project, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, will have a significant effect on a European Site.


Conclusion

The proposed Maritime Usage Activity will not have a possible significant effect on a European site; therefore, Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment is not required

Signature and Date of Recommending Officer


Dr Ciar O'Toole
06/06/2025

Signature and Date of Decision Maker


John Evans, Director of Assessment, Research and Data.
10/06/2025