

Switch to gas to save half the jobs at Tarbert power station

Martin Byrnes

THE conversion of Tarbert power station from oil to natural gas is expected to save about half of the present 129 jobs as the ownership transfers from the ESB to Spanish energy giant Endesa. No exact timescale for the conversion has been announced.

In May 2006, the ESB had announced the complete closure of the plant.

The gas for the converted power station is expected to come from the Shannon LNG liquid natural gas importation and storage facility planned for Ballylongford. The Ballylongford operation will entail the importation of gas in liquefied form from parts of the world where it is surplus to local demand. The company has applied for compulsory purchase authority to link Ballylongford to the existing Bord Gais western main at a point near where it crosses beneath the Shannon at Boland's Meadow, Foynes.

That 26km pipeline would allow the Ballylongford facility to feed into the national gas grid. The proposal as submitted does not, however, indicate the route of a future connection to the Tarbert power plant.

Welcoming the saving of jobs, many of them in west Limerick, and the assurance from the ESB

of no compulsory redundancies, Deputy Dan Neville expressed his reservations about long-term reliance on gas for electricity generation. He suggested that the conversion from oil to gas would afford an opportunity to plan for a further change to biofuel.

"Gas, being a fossil fuel, will not be the cheapest fuel 20 or 30 years from now," he said. "Miscanthus grass is used as a fuel for electricity generation in the UK and across Europe, and is increasingly in demand. Its

growth has been successfully piloted here at Adare. It has a potential to keep farm families on the land."

Deputy Neville said that farmers are continuing to take up other jobs in order to maintain their families. That means that they cannot intensively farm the land, he said, but a ready purchaser for miscanthus, which would grow on most of the land in County Limerick, would provide valuable family income.

"I agree that the priority is to

keep the station at Tarbert open, and I welcome the present moves, but I would ask that the planning for the changeover to gas would also include a further conversion to biofuel in the future as the price of gas continues to increase," said Deputy Neville.

Kilcolgan Residents' Association, in a statement issued this week through their spokesman, John McElligott, also point to the absence of a proposed gas line route to Tarbert Island from the Ballylongford to Foynes plans.

"Shannon LNG has even proposed the development of a new gas-powered electricity station dangerously close to the planned LNG terminal on its own site at Kilcolgan, giving the American multinational huge control over a large amount of strategic energy infrastructure in the country," he said.

The residents were also critical of the use of "fast track" planning procedures in respect of the gas link to Foynes and asked that gas be made available locally to aid development.



The conversion to gas from coal at Tarbert power station when it is taken over by Spanish giant Endesa will result in half the jobs at the plant being saved, after a complete closure was announced in 2006