

Flaxlands Solar Farm

Reptile Survey Report

Ampyr Solar Europe

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1. Executive Summary

AECOM Limited (hereafter referred to as 'AECOM') have been instructed by Ampyr Solar Europe to carry out a reptile survey to support the proposed installation of a solar photovoltaic array and Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) (hereafter referred to as the 'Proposed Development') within land north of Royal Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire. The boundary of the Proposed Development is hereafter referred to as the Ecology Assessment Boundary and is shown on Figure 1.

A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal Report (PEAR) undertaken by AECOM in 2024¹ identified suitable habitat for reptiles in two fields. One of these fields is within the current Ecology Assessment Boundary, and the other is directly adjacent to it - Fields 1 and 2, hereafter referred to as the 'Survey Area'. The location and extent of the Survey Area is shown on Figure 1.

The purpose of the survey and this report is to determine the presence or likely absence of reptiles within the Ecology Assessment Boundary and to assess whether reptiles pose an ecological constraint to the Proposed Development. This report presents the methodology, results and recommendations of the reptile survey undertaken by AECOM in September 2024.

No reptiles were recorded during the survey and reptiles are considered likely absent from the Ecology Assessment Boundary. Therefore, reptiles do not pose a constraint to the Proposed Development.

Avoidance of impacts on reptile populations has been designed into the Proposed Development with a minimum 15 m no-build buffer from any woodland and a 10 m buffer from any hedgerows. There will be no significant permanent loss of habitat suitable for reptiles, as grassland beneath the solar photovoltaic array will be retained into the future following construction. This would limit the impact of the Proposed Development on potential reptile populations and preserves habitats which offer suitability for reptile species.

As reptiles are likely absent from the Ecology Assessment Boundary, construction activities are considered likely to have negligible impact on individual reptiles or reptile populations. Therefore, no additional mitigation is required.

Best practice recommendations for phased vegetation clearance have been made, which will also prevent harm to other species including great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*) which are known to be present within the Ecology Assessment Boundary and this will help to mitigate residual impacts to individual reptiles should they have gone undetected during the survey. Where works require vegetation clearance, suitable grassland vegetation should undergo a two-phased process of habitat management and hand searches. This should take place during the reptile active season (March-October inclusive) and avoid the reptile hibernation period (November-February, inclusive). No dismantling of suitable hibernation features is to be undertaken during the hibernation period.

Recommendations for habitat enhancement include:

- the enhancement of grasslands within the Ecology Assessment Boundary to provide increased foraging resource and sheltering opportunity through an increased diversity in species and structure, including 'lowland meadows' Priority Habitat type; and,
- the creation of refugia and hibernacula to improve hibernation opportunity for reptiles.

Should works to facilitate the Proposed Development be delayed further than 18 months² after this assessment (i.e. works begin after March 2026), an update survey may be required.

This executive summary is a summary of the report only, refer to the full report for full details.

¹ AECOM (2024) Flaxlands Solar Farm- Preliminary Ecological Appraisal Report – Version 2

² CIEEM (2019) – Advice Note on the Lifespan of Ecological Reports and Surveys

2. Introduction

AECOM Limited ('AECOM') was commissioned by Ampyr Solar Europe to undertake a reptile survey to support the proposed installation of a solar photovoltaic array and Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) (hereafter referred to as 'the Proposed Development') within land north of Royal Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire (hereafter referred to as the 'Ecology Assessment Boundary') as shown on Figure 1.

The need for further assessment for reptiles was identified by an initial Preliminary Ecological Appraisal Report (PEAR) produced by AECOM in 2024¹. Fourteen records of reptiles were identified within 2 km of the Ecology Assessment Boundary during the PEAR desk study.

This report presents the methodology and results of the reptile survey undertaken by AECOM in September 2024. This comprises habitat suitability assessment, visual encounter survey and Artificial Cover Object (ACOs) survey focused within two fields, one of which is within the updated Ecology Assessment Boundary. This report provides an assessment of the potential impacts of the Proposed Development on reptiles and recommendations regarding any mitigation, compensation and enhancement measures required.

2.1 Ecology Assessment Boundary Location and Description

The location of the Ecology Assessment Boundary lies approximately 1.7 km north of the town of Royal Wootton Bassett and approximately 250 m north of the M4 within Wiltshire County Council centred at Ordnance Survey national grid reference SU 06910 85466. The Ecology Assessment Boundary is comprised of two land parcels, a western and an eastern land parcel, joined via Flaxlands Lane. Both parcels consist of multiple agricultural fields bounded by hedgerows including those with mature broadleaved trees and existing farm tracks across the Ecology Assessment Boundary. Wet ditches, assumed to be associated with the drainage of fields, are present in several locations throughout the Ecology Assessment Boundary, as are standing bodies of water.

The Ecology Assessment Boundary is surrounded by agricultural grassland fields which are common throughout the immediate landscape. There are blocks of broadleaved woodland on the boundaries of the Ecology Assessment Boundary in the east and west. The urban developed area of Royal Wootton Bassett lies to the south which is separated from the Ecology Assessment Boundary by the M4.

2.2 Reptile Survey Area

The Survey Area comprises two fields as shown on Figure 1. The Survey Area is split into Field 1 and Field 2 (Figure 1).

The initial PEAR¹ which had a more expansive boundary was used to inform the reptile survey approach. Both fields were selected as part of the survey effort due to their suitability for reptiles. A revision of the Proposed Development was made in June 2024, which excluded Field 2 of the Survey Area from the footprint of the Proposed Development. Both fields were surveyed to provide greater context and allow flexibility for potential future development boundary iterations.

2.3 The Proposed Development

The Proposed Development includes the installation of a 49.9 MW solar farm and 49.9 MW BESS. Solar photovoltaic arrays will be situated in both western and eastern land parcels. The most recent concept design (June 2024) includes the BESS located in the north of the Ecology Assessment Boundary. It is understood that the Proposed Development will require clearance of vegetation, access tracks for plant/machinery/vehicles to access working areas and, widening of gaps within hedgerows for access.

In relation to the Survey Area, Field 1 is a proposed area for a solar photovoltaic array and Field 2 now lies outside the footprint of the Proposed Development where no development is currently anticipated.

2.4 Objectives

The objective of this assessment is to:

- determine presence or likely absence of reptiles within the Ecology Assessment Boundary;
- provide an assessment of the distribution of reptiles within the Survey Area;

- provide an assessment of potential impacts resulting from the Proposed Development on reptile individuals and populations; and,
- provide recommendations for avoidance, mitigation and compensation of potential impacts, and for enhancements where appropriate.

3. Legislation and Policy

3.1 The Wildlife and Countryside Act

All widespread species of reptile, adder (*Vipera berus*), grass snake (*Natrix helvetica*), viviparous lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) and slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*), receive legal protection through their inclusion on Schedule 5 (Sections 9(1) and 9(5)) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). It is therefore an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill or injure a reptile; however, unlike European Protected Species, protection does not extend to their habitats.

3.2 The Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act

All UK reptiles are also listed as Species of Principal Importance for Conservation in England under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. Section 40 of the same Act requires that local and regional authorities have regard to the conservation of biodiversity in England when carrying out their normal functions.

It should be noted that, where it is predictable that reptiles are likely to be killed or injured by an activity (such as habitat clearance) this could legally constitute 'intentionally killing or injuring' even if that was not the intention of the activity.

3.3 Good Practice

Current guidance stresses the need for developers to maintain protected species within their current range at a favourable status. To achieve this, developers are often required to include mitigation strategies with their applications that describe how the project will identify and remediate potential adverse effects. The hierarchy of mitigation in descending order of preference is to avoid, mitigate and compensate³.

3.4 Quality Assurance

The survey and report were completed in line with AECOM's Integrated Management System (IMS). Our IMS places great emphasis on professionalism, technical excellence, quality, environmental and Health and Safety management. All staff members are committed to establishing and maintaining our certification to the international standards BS EN ISO 9001:2015 and 14001:2015 and BS ISO 45001:2018.

All AECOM ecologists who worked on this project follow the code of professional conduct produced by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM)⁴ when undertaking ecological work and are members of CIEEM at the appropriate level.

³ CIEEM (2018) Guidelines for Ecological Impact Assessment in the UK and Ireland: Terrestrial, Freshwater, Coastal and Marine. Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, Winchester.

⁴ CIEEM (2022) Code of Professional Conduct. Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, Hampshire.

4. Methodology

4.1 Desk-Based Study

The PEAR prepared for the Ecology Assessment Boundary in 2024 comprised a desk study undertaken in May 2024 to review habitat and protected species records since 2014. In relation to reptiles, the following resources were consulted:

- the online Multi Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) database to identify statutory designated sites within 2 km of the Ecology Assessment Boundary; and,
- the Wiltshire & Swindon Biological Records Centre (WSBRC) to search for records of reptile species, locally designated sites and habitats within 2 km of the Ecology Assessment Boundary.

The initial PEAR¹ covered a greater area though was used to inform the reptile survey approach. The Survey Area was selected due to the suitability of the fields for reptiles. A revision of the Proposed Development was made in June 2024, which excluded the Field 2 from the footprint of works. Both fields were retained for assessment, as outlined above in Section 2.2.

4.2 Field Surveys

4.2.1 Habitat Suitability Assessment

The Ecology Assessment Boundary was assessed for its potential to support reptiles on each of the following elements:

- location in relation to species range;
- vegetation structure;
- insolation (sun exposure);
- aspect;
- topography;
- surface geology;
- habitat connectivity;
- prey availability;
- refuge and hibernation opportunities;
- egg-laying habitat; and,
- disturbance.

Given the geographic location and nature of the habitats present, it is considered highly unlikely that the European Protected Species sand lizard (*Lacerta agilis*) and smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*) would occur within or adjacent to the Ecology Assessment Boundary. These species are restricted to the counties of Dorset, Hampshire, Surrey, West Sussex with sand lizard also being found on the Lancashire coast. As such, neither species are considered further in this report.

Following this assessment, areas of suitable habitat were selected for presence or likely absence surveys.

4.2.2 Presence or Likely Absence Surveys

Surveys to determine the presence or likely absence of reptiles incorporated two techniques during each visit to maximise the likelihood of encountering reptiles: visual encounter survey and Artificial Cover Object (ACO) survey. Both techniques have advantages and disadvantages; however, when used concurrently the combination of these two techniques greatly increases the detectability of native British reptiles⁵. The presence or likely absence surveys were undertaken paying due regard to Froglife Advice Sheet 10: reptile survey⁶ and the Herpetofauna Workers Manual⁷.

⁵ Sewell, D. Griffiths, R.A., Beebee, T.J.C., Foster, J. & Wilkinson, J.W. (2013) Survey protocols for the British herpetofauna

⁶ Froglife (1999) Froglife Advice Sheet 10: reptile survey – an introduction to planning, conducting and interpreting surveys for snakes and lizard conservation. Froglife, Halesworth

⁷ Gent, T. & Gibson, S. (1998) Herpetofauna Workers' Manual. JNCC, Peterborough

The reptile presence or likely absence surveys comprised eight visits (a minimum of seven is required), in accordance with published guidance. All survey visits were planned to be completed under suitable environmental conditions (detailed in Section 5.2).

4.2.2.1 Visual Encounter Survey

Direct observation is effective at detecting common lizard, grass snake and adder⁸. However, slow-worm are reluctant to bask in the open. For slow-worm, a visual encounter survey is unlikely to be successful and detection relies on alternative techniques (such as an ACO Survey).

The surveyor slowly walked a predetermined transect typically following the line of ACOs (see section 4.2.2.2 below) but deviating to incorporate suitable features such as scrub and south facing embankments. The surveyor scanned three or four metres ahead for basking or fleeing reptiles. Although the routes were kept consistent, the order and direction that they were followed was varied. Where reptiles were observed, their location was recorded as the nearest ACO or as a target note, where appropriate to identify areas and habitats of particular importance for reptiles.

All visits were planned to be completed during suitable weather. Due regard was paid to the following environmental parameters⁶:

- air temperature between 9°C and 20°C;
- sunny or hazy days;
- no rain;
- little to no wind; and,
- avoidance of prolonged periods of dry or exceptional hot weather.

4.2.2.2 Artificial Cover Object (ACO) Survey

A total of 40 ACOs (1 m x 0.5 m sections of bitumen roofing felt, or corrugated metal) were deployed within the Survey Area (Figure 1) on 13 August 2024. The survey focused on the south-facing grassland embankments and associated hedgerows. ACOs were placed further inside the fields where features were less likely to receive direct sunlight during the day. The refuges were selectively placed within suitable habitat and, where possible, adjacent to features of interest as those placed in large open areas are less effective than those adjacent to patches of cover⁹.

The density of ACOs deployed within the Survey Area (3.65 ha) was 10.9 ACOs per hectare, thus meeting the baseline density of 10 refuges per hectare recommended in the survey guidelines⁶.

Once placed, the ACOs were left to bed in for 21 days before the first check. This is more time than the recommended 14 days stated in the survey guidelines¹⁰.

The ACOs were checked on eight visits (a minimum of seven is required), in accordance with published guidance⁶ during September 2024. Presence or absence of reptiles under or on top of each ACO was recorded, including species, sex and estimated age class where this could be established. All survey visits were planned to be completed under suitable environmental conditions. Table 4.1 provides details of the environmental conditions during each visit, as well as dates and times of each survey.

Table 4.1. Environmental Conditions During Field Survey Visits

Visit	Date	Start – End Times	Air Temp (°C)	Cloud (%)	Wind (Beaufort*)	Visibility	Recent Weather and Ground Conditions
1	03 September 2024	09:15 – 10:00	16-17	100	1	Excellent	Light rain early morning, with broken clouds and sunshine prior to survey.
2	06 September 2024	08:15 – 09:00	18	100	0	Excellent	Heavy rain overnight with fog cleared by early morning prior to survey. Torrential rain immediately after survey.

⁸ Highways Agency (2005) - Design manual for roads and bridges: Volume 10, nature conservation advice in relation to reptiles and roads.

⁹ Natural England (2011). *Natural England Technical Information Note TIN102 – Reptile mitigation guidelines*. Natural England, Peterborough

¹⁰ Edgar, P., Foster, J. and Baker, J. (2010) Reptile Habitat Management Handbook. Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Bournemouth

Visit	Date	Start – End Times	Air Temp (°C)	Cloud (%)	Wind (Beaufort*)	Visibility	Recent Weather and Ground Conditions
3	10 September 2024	09:30 – 10:15	16	100	2	Excellent	Some drizzle in morning. Damp underfoot but dry beneath ACOs.
4	12 September 2024	10:53 – 11:27	12	10 – 30	3	Excellent	Mild and dry weather two days prior to survey. Light drizzle during survey but sunny throughout.
5	17 September 2024	10:30 – 11:00	15	10 – 30	3	Excellent	Dry overnight with dew dried prior to survey.
6	19 September 2024	10:52 – 11:13	18	100	2	Excellent	Dry overnight. Ground slightly damp. Moderate (4) breeze by end of survey.
7	24 September 2024	13:51 – 14:05	16	60 – 90	3	Excellent	Recent rain, with some water pooled on a couple of ACOs. 100% cloud cover at survey end.
8	27 September 2024	14:08 – 14:25	12	10-30	3	Excellent	Moderate (4) breeze and rainfall earlier in day; ground saturated after recent heavy rain.

*Beaufort Scale: 0 no wind, 1 = light air, 2 = light breeze, 3 = gentle breeze, 4 = moderate breeze, 5 = fresh breeze, 6 = strong breeze, 7 = near gale

4.3 Limitations

The aim of a desk study is to help characterise the baseline context of a site and provide valuable background information that would not be captured by a single survey alone. Information obtained from a desk study is dependent upon people and organisations having made and submitted records for the area of interest. As such, a lack of records for a particular species does not necessarily mean that the species do not occur in the study area. Likewise, the presence of records for particular species does not automatically mean that these still occur within the area of interest or are relevant in the context of the proposed development.

The weather conditions during the second visit on 06 September 2024 were not optimal due to recent heavy rain and although the conditions during the visit were suitable, the ground and some ACOs were still damp and cold, making it less suitable for reptiles to bask on or under an ACO. As a result, an eighth visit was conducted with the aim to complete seven visits during optimal conditions. However, the eighth visit also encountered sub-optimal conditions due to the saturated ground following constant heavy rain at the end of September. This is not considered a significant limitation as a robust survey effort was still undertaken with surveys being conducted varying times of day and under a range of environmental conditions.

Five of the 40 ACOs were damaged prior to the first survey (Figure 1). After deployment, a strip of grassland around the edge of the Field 2 was mown resulting in five ACOs being shredded, and one cut in half. This left 35 complete ACOs, resulting in an ACO density of 9.5 ACO per hectare just under the recommended density of 10 per hectare. The damage was noticed during the first survey in September but no further ACOs could be deployed during the survey period due to the requirement for a minimum 14 day bedding-in period, which is necessary to allow reptiles to become accustomed to the ACOs before they can effectively be used for detection. This loss is not considered a significant limitation as the damaged ACOs were all located in Field 2 which is outside the revised footprint of the Proposed Development. Field 1 contained 21 ACOs and is approximately 1.7 ha in size, the density of ACOs in this area was therefore 12 ACOs per hectare and is above that of the recommended guidance⁶.

5. Results

5.1 Desk-Based Study

The desk study returned 14 records of slow-worm recorded within 2 km of the Ecology Assessment Boundary; all of which are located approximately 1.9 km north at Purton, with some connectivity to the Ecology Assessment Boundary via grassland and woodland. Minor roads are present between the records and the Ecology Assessment Boundary and may cause some severance between these records and the Ecology Assessment Boundary. There is one record of grass snake south of the Ecology Assessment Boundary at Royal Wootton Bassett, separated from the Ecology Assessment Boundary by the M4.

5.2 Field Survey

A habitat suitability assessment was undertaken and as per the original PEAR. This confirmed the suitability of the northern most fields within the Ecology Assessment Boundary for reptiles due to the presence of grassland with opportunity for basking reptiles surrounded by scrub and hedgerows with provision for shelter hibernation.

The fields were assessed as suitable due to their insolation, aspect and topography with both fields being south facing and therefore have a high exposure to direct sunlight. The topography of Field 1 is particularly beneficial to basking reptiles due to the steep-sided embankment that runs across the central portion of the field maximising the sun exposure throughout the day. Fields 1 and 2 are modified grassland fields with some variation in sward high and tussocky grassland which provides suitable microclimates for reptiles to bask within. Both fields are bounded by hedgerows and scrub habitat that offers suitable sheltering and hibernation habitat within close proximity of the fields.

Although the modified grasslands offer suitable foraging and basking habitat for reptiles, no reptiles were recorded during any of the survey visits.

6. Impact Assessment

Although the grasslands within the Ecology Assessment Boundary offer suitable foraging and basking habitat for reptiles, reptiles are considered likely absent and do not pose an immediate constraint to the Proposed Development.

There will be no significant permanent loss of habitat suitable for reptiles, as grassland beneath the solar array will be retained following construction.

Avoidance of impacts on hibernating reptiles has been designed into the Proposed Development with a 15 m no-build buffer from any woodland and a 10 m buffer from any hedgerows. This would limit the impact of the Proposed Development on potential reptile populations and preserve a variety of habitats including structured ecotones which create different microclimates with suitability for reptile species.

As reptiles are likely absent from the Ecology Assessment Boundary, construction activities are considered likely to have negligible impact on individual reptiles or reptile populations.

Should works to facilitate the Proposed Development be delayed further than 18 months² after the Ecology Assessment Boundary assessment undertaken (i.e. works begin after March 2026), an update survey may be required as determined by an appropriately experienced ecologist.

7. Recommendations for Mitigation and Best Practice

As no impacts to reptiles are anticipated as a result of the Proposed Development, and avoidance buffer areas already in place, no additional mitigation is required.

Best practice recommendations for phased vegetation clearance are made below, which will also prevent harm to other species including great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*) which are known to be present within the Ecology Assessment Boundary and will help to mitigate residual impacts to individual reptiles should they have gone undetected during the survey.

7.1 Phased Vegetation Clearance

Any vegetation clearance or construction works (such as excavation or vegetation clearance) that would result in disturbance to areas of suitable reptile habitat within the Survey Area should follow a phased process of clearance. This method must be undertaken in suitable weather conditions (warmer than 5°C overnight) with daytime temperatures above 9°C) so that reptiles are able to relocate to adjacent areas of suitable habitat.

No dismantling of suitable hibernation features is to be undertaken during the hibernation period (November-February, inclusive). All vegetation clearance works should be undertaken during the day with no working at night. Works should be conducted during March-October, inclusive, when reptiles will be active and can disperse independently into adjacent suitable habitat. Potential clashes with vegetation clearance during the breeding bird season (March-August, inclusive) and impacts to ground nesting birds will need to be managed as advised by a suitably experienced ecologist.

The phased clearance should be as follows:

- **Phase 1:** Suitable grassland habitat will be cut with hand tools (e.g. strimmer) to 150 mm in height and left for 24 hours in suitable, dry weather to allow any reptiles to move into areas of adjacent safe, suitable habitat. Vegetation clearance must be undertaken in a linear fashion and directed towards suitable retained habitats. Arisings should be collected and deposited on retained habitat.
- **Phase 2:** The grassland will then be cut to ground level, rendering it unsuitable for reptiles. The vegetation must then be maintained at a short sward height (50mm or below) to discourage reptiles species from re-entering the area prior to works commencing.

7.2 Recommendations for Enhancement

The following suggestions are made to enhance the value of the Ecology Assessment Boundary for reptiles during operation:

- increasing the suitability of grassland within the Ecology Assessment Boundary for reptiles. Fields within the Ecology Assessment Boundary surrounding Fields 1 and 2 could be enhanced through habitat management to increase their floristic diversity with the aim of matching or exceeding that of Field 1 which was categorised as lowland meadows priority habitat during the National Vegetation Classification (NVC) survey undertaken by AECOM in July 2024¹¹. This would expand the area of suitable accessible habitat and encourage a greater range of invertebrates that in turn would improve the reptile foraging suitability within the Ecology Assessment Boundary; and,
- creating reptile refuges and hibernacula, for example piles of cut woody vegetation. This can be particularly beneficial following habitat restoration works where such features may be absent. This provides areas for reptiles to both hibernate within or to bask on during the active season¹⁰, as well as being beneficial to other species such as amphibians, invertebrates and small mammals

¹¹ AECOM (2024) Flaxlands Solar Farm – National Vegetation Classification Survey Report

Appendix A Figure

Figure 1. Reptile Survey Plan



AECOM

PROJECT

Flaxlands Solar Farm

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LEGEND

- Ecology Assessment Boundary
- Reptile Survey Area
- Artificial Cover Objects (ACOs)
 - Felt reptile mat
 - Metal corrugated reptile mat
 - Reptile mat destroyed after deployment but prior to surveys commencing

NOTES

1: Maxar, Microsoft

ISSUE PURPOSE

Reptile Survey Report

PROJECT NUMBER

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FIGURE TITLE

Flaxlands Reptile Survey Map

FIGURE NUMBER

Figure 1

