

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

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Bridge Farm quarry, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire.

Proposed extension

Planning statement

September 2016



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1. Introduction

This statement has been prepared to accompany a planning application for a small extension to the quarry at Bridge Farm, Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire.

1.1 Reason for application

Bridge Farm Quarry at Sutton Courtenay is an established operation where the existing permitted reserves of sand and gravel are running low. Reserves in adjacent fields have been identified which can be worked as an extension to the current operation and processed using the existing plant. If this sand and gravel is not worked as part of the existing operation, it is unlikely that it would be viable and therefore the reserve would be effectively sterilised. This planning application is therefore made to enable the reserves to be realised and to contribute to the requirements for sand and gravel in the South Oxfordshire area.

1.2 The applicant

The planning application is submitted by Hanson, which is part of the Heidelberg Cement Group, one of the largest building materials manufacturers in the world, with locations in 40 countries.

Hanson is a leading supplier of heavy building materials to the UK construction industry producing aggregates, ready-mixed concrete, asphalt, cement and cement related materials.

It employs over 3,000 people in the UK in jobs ranging from specialist and professional managers through to production operatives.

1.3 The application and this statement

The application is accompanied by other documents including an Environmental Statement which includes technical reports and a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), and a full series of working and restoration plans.

This statement aims to:

- Outline the proposal
- Review the planning context
- Appraise the relevant topics and policies,
- Provide a conclusion

2. The proposal

2.1 Location

Bridge Farm Quarry is located between Sutton Courtenay to the west, and Appleford to the East. The major centres of Didcot and Abingdon are both within approximately 3 km of the quarry.

The proposed extension to the existing quarry comprises three fields currently in agricultural use. Each of the fields has boundary hedgerows and trees, and the northern fields are bounded by the course of the River Thames.

The existing Bridge Farm working area is immediately south and east of the proposed extension. Both existing and proposed areas have the B4013 as southern boundary, and a railway forming the eastern boundary.

2.2 Outline of scheme

The proposed extension is adjacent to the existing Phases 1 - 4 at Bridge Farm, and is calculated to provide a reserve of approximately 500,000 tonnes of sand and gravel, to be processed using the existing plant.

The extension proposes working and restoration to continue in a progressive manner in three phases, commencing with Phase 5, located to the west of the approved Phase 4. Phases 6 and 7 then follow in a clockwise sequence.

The working life of Phase 5 is approximately eight months, with Phases 6 and 7 being six and ten months respectively. Restoration will as far as possible be achieved as part of progressive working methodology, with sowing and planting carried out in the first suitable season.

The sequence of working is shown graphically in submitted drawings numbered S3/HAN/10/22 to 26 with the outline restoration scheme shown on drawing number S3/HAN/10/21. The scheme is described in more detail below with reference to the five working stages described by the drawings.

The submitted scheme is the result of an iterative design process which has taken account of desktop research, fieldwork, and other information.

2.3 General principles

All soil handling, mineral extraction, restoration principles and methods are to follow the good practice techniques developed and practised by Hanson on its sites for many years.

Soils and overburden will be stripped by excavator and transported by low ground pressure dump trucks. All soils are to be stripped and stored by type, topsoil separately from subsoil.

Gravel is to be extracted by long reach excavator and transported to the plant site by conveyor, which goes under the B4016, in the same way as at present. The silt arising from the processing is taken back to the working area by pipe which will run along the conveyor corridor

as far as the existing silt ponds, then under the road, using an existing culvert, and into the southern area of Phase 4B where it will form part of the overall restoration scheme.

As in the existing workings, all the proposed working areas allow for appropriate standoffs to trees and hedgerows and other landscape features on the site and its periphery. A minimum standoff of 25m is allowed to the River Thames and a minimum of 18m is allowed from the boundary fence to the railway (meaning the toe of the embankment is 22-23m from the edge of extraction.)

Phases 6 and 7 of the scheme, nearest to the river are to be worked 'wet', with gravel allowed to drain before being loaded on to the conveyor. These areas are to be restored to water bodies fringed with reedbed, and with lake margins of grassland within the existing hedgerow boundaries, all of which are retained.

The Phase 5 field is worked 'dry', by dewatering into Phase 4B, thereby enabling a more precise placement of overburden and soils than wet working, to form a soil profile back to near original ground levels. This field was identified through an Agricultural Land Classification survey as having the best quality land on the site and hence it is restored back to agricultural use.

The scheme is described in more detail below with reference to the five working stages described by the drawings.

2.4 Stage 1

Soils and overburden are stripped from the conveyor corridor, loading hopper and gravel stockpiling area at the western end of Phase 7, and stored in bunds on the south-western margin of Phase 7. Soils from the haul road to be established between Phases 5, 6 and 7 are stripped and stored in bunds alongside the haul road.

300mm depth of topsoil is stripped from Phase 5 and stored in bunds on the perimeter of Phase 5 area. 300mm depth of upper subsoil is stripped from Phase 5 and stored at the western end of Phase 7. The footprint of the subsoil stockpile is to be stripped of topsoil and stored on the southern perimeter of Phase 7. Lower subsoil and overburden is to be stripped from the 'picture frame' area in Phase 5 and stored in the centre of the Phase 5 area.

Gravel is extracted from the 'picture frame' area in Phase 5 and transported to the conveyor hopper / gravel stock pile in Phase 7 and as the gravel is extracted, the seal is formed in order to enable dry gravel extraction without any derogation of groundwater.

Lastly in this stage, 300mm depth of topsoil is stripped from Phase 6 and stored in bunds on perimeter of the Phase 6 area.

2.5 Stage 2

In this stage, gravel is extracted from Phase 5 and taken to the conveyor hopper / gravel stock pile in Phase 7, and Phase 5 is progressively undergoing restoration by excavating from the subsoil / overburden store and stripping in-situ lower subsoil / overburden from central part of Phase 5 and placing as backfill.

2.6 Stage 3

Subsoil and overburden is stripped from Phase 6 and placed in the worked out Phase 5 area to create formation levels, ie 1.20m below final restoration levels, to allow for final placement of soil profile.

Gravel is then extracted in Phase 6, working from west to east, and taking it to the conveyor hopper / stockpile at the western end of Phase 7.

Also in this stage, topsoil is stripped to a depth of 300mm from the Phase 7 area and stored in bunds on the perimeter of Phase 7.

2.7 Stage 4

In this stage, Phase 5 is fully restored, as follows. Subsoil and overburden is stripped from part of Phase 7 and placed in the worked out void in Phase 5 to complete backfilling to formation levels. Good quality in-situ upper subsoil is stripped from part of Phase 7 and spread as lower subsoil across the Phase 5 restoration area to a depth of 600mm. Upper subsoil is excavated from the stockpile at the western end of Phase 7 and spread as upper subsoil across the Phase 5 restoration area to a depth of 300mm. To complete the soil profile in Phase 5, topsoil is taken from the perimeter topsoil bunds and spread across the Phase 5 area to a depth of 300mm to achieve final restoration levels.

Stage 4 also includes the completion of gravel extraction in Phase 6, and commencement of creation of lake margins in the Phase 6 area by progressive placement of subsoil / overburden stripped from Phase 7.

Lastly, this stage includes commencement of gravel extraction in Phase 7, working from east to west.

2.8 Stage 5

In this last stage of working, the remaining subsoil / overburden from Phase 7 is stripped and placed to create lake margins and the causeway in the Phase 7 area. Topsoil from the perimeter bunds in Phase 6 is spread across lake margins in Phase 6 to achieve final restoration levels / lake edge profiles. The extraction of gravel in Phase 7 is completed.

Final restoration is effected by taking topsoil from perimeter bunds in Phase 7 and spreading across lake margins and the causeway in Phase 7 to achieve final restoration levels / lake edge profiles. The margins to the silted area of Phase 4B are then regraded to create reed beds and lake edge profiles. Topsoil is taken from the perimeter bunds in Phase 4B and spread across the margins to achieve final restoration levels.

2.9 Restoration

The restoration scheme has been designed as an integral part of the workings so as to enable restoration of the worked area at the earliest opportunity and in order to achieve a quality restoration with beneficial afteruse.

The restoration design takes into account a range of factors, including:

- restoring the best quality land to agriculture;
- enhancing biodiversity;
- hydrological considerations;
- landowner requirements;
- creating a landscape appropriate to the area;
- deterring wildfowl from gathering on the site in large numbers in order to minimise birdstrike risk as required by the MOD; and
- using available materials on site in the most effective way possible.

The agricultural land provides a restoration soil profile which should provide an ALC grading equivalent to that which existed previously, and the water bodies created are designed for a flexible amenity use by the landowner.

All the existing field boundary hedgerows and riverside trees are retained throughout the working, and additional hedgerow planting is included in the restoration scheme.

2.10 Summary

The extension area is adjacent to existing workings and will enable the extraction of approximately 500,000 tonnes sand and gravel whilst existing infrastructure is in place to enable it to be processed.

The proposal is the result of an iterative design process. Part of the site is to be worked dry and restored to agriculture and the remainder restored to water bodies which take account of the MOD requirement to minimise birdstrike risk. The working and restoration links with the existing Bridge Farm area and provides for the site to be restored in a cohesive and timely manner.

3. Planning policy

3.1 Designations

The proposed extension site is not subject to any international or national designations in relation to landscape, ecology or heritage.

3.2 Mineral planning policy documents

Mineral planning policy is currently set out in the local policies which have been 'saved' from the Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan 1996 (OMWP) and at National level, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and online National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG).

The OMWP is very dated, and refers to Structure Plans, which no longer exist. A replacement plan is in preparation and Part 1 – the Core Strategy – has reached an advanced stage although it has not yet been through Examination by an Inspector. Hearings are scheduled to commence in mid- September 2016.

All mineral policy is based on the understanding that minerals are a scarce and valuable resource, and can only be worked where they are found. There is also a common element in requiring a landbank of at least 7 years worth of sand and gravel supply to be maintained.

3.3 Extant local policy

Saved policies from the OMWP which are relevant are as follows:

Policy SD1 identifies that separate landbanks will be maintained for sharp sand and gravel and soft sand to accord with current Government advice.

Policy SD2 permits small extensions to existing quarries. These are not expected to last for more than three years.

Policy SD10 recognises the importance of not sterilising mineral or making its extraction more difficult.

Policy PE2 seeks to limit the areas of mineral working to: those identified in the plan; those acceptable under policy SD2; or elsewhere where justified by need.

Policies PE4, PE5 and PE7 relate to hydrological considerations and require proposals not to adversely affect ground water levels, flood flows or flood storage, or the setting and nature conservation value of the River Thames and other significant watercourses.

Policies PE8 and PE9 refer to archaeology and require a preliminary assessment of any archaeological remains and SAM to be retained in situ.

Policy PE13 requires restoration within a reasonable timescale to an after-use appropriate to the location and surroundings.

Policy SC3 relates specifically to the Sutton Courtenay area which is identified in the plan for mineral working. The policy requires a routeing agreement for HGV movements.

3.4 Emerging local policy

The Core Strategy Proposed submission document (August 2015) confirms the Sutton Courtenay area as a Minerals Strategic Resource Area.

The Core Strategy also identifies that production of sand and gravel has become increasingly concentrated in the northern part of the county and there is a need for sand and gravel from the southern area to more closely reflect the distribution of demand for aggregate within the county.

Core policies reflect the OMWP environmental concerns and protections in regard to hydrology, archaeology and nature conservation.

Policy C1: Sustainable development relates to and reflects the key element of national policy in requiring a positive approach to minerals and waste development, reflecting the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

3.5 National policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out in paragraph 144 that when determining planning applications, local planning authorities should give great weight to the benefits of the mineral extraction, including to the economy. The NPPF also notes the need (paragraph 145) for maintaining at least 7 years landbank, based on an annual LAA, and that the landbank should not be bound up in a very few sites so as not to stifle competition.

Economic considerations are also drawn out in the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG)¹ in relation to the benefits of extensions to existing sites. These economic considerations include: being able to continue to extract the resource; retaining jobs; and being able to utilise the plant and other infrastructure.

¹ Paragraph 010 Reference ID: 27-010-20140306

4. Consultation

The application has been informed by consultations about the proposed extension to Bridge Farm with officers of Oxfordshire County Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council.

In addition, public consultation has been undertaken, and a drop-in style event was held in Appleford Village Hall on Friday 15th July 2016. This included a series of display boards setting out information about the site and the proposals, together with members of the design team being available to discuss and answer any questions. Feedback was sought and attendees invited to complete a feedback form.

The event was advertised in Appleford and Sutton Courtenay by leaflets delivered to individual addresses, on village noticeboards, and electronically to Appleford facebook contacts via the Parish Council and on Sutton Courtenay village website.

Approximately 25-30 people attended the event and nine completed feedback forms were received. Some comments were made about the condition of the road network and seeking better access for pedestrians and cyclists in the Sutton Courtenay/Appleford area, and there were suggestions about enhanced access to the restored site. As the site is in private ownership, this is a matter for the owner. All the feedback received on the proposed restoration was positive.

Further detail of consultation and a full list of the responses is provided in the Statement of Community Involvement included in Part 2 of the ES submitted with the planning application.

5. Appraisal

This section of the statement reviews and appraises key planning considerations of the extension application

5.1 Agriculture and soils

The site was identified as potentially including Best and Most Versatile agricultural land as this was known to be present in the area. An ALC survey was therefore commissioned to inform the design of the working and restoration scheme. This is included in Part 2 of the ES submitted with the application.

The majority of the site is Grade 3b land. The south-western field – Phase 5 in the scheme- is Grade 2. The working and restoration scheme provides for all soils to be stripped and stored separately, and for the best soil to be placed in the Phase 5 area to restore this back to agricultural land. The ALC report identifies that droughtiness is currently a limiting factor on this land and the replacement profile including overburden in place of sand and gravel therefore has the potential to improve the current situation.

5.2 Biodiversity/ecology

A series of ecological surveys were conducted including Phase 1 habitat survey and protected species surveys of the site. In addition consideration was given to the potential effect of workings on the nearest designated site, Culham Brake SSSI, 1.7km north of the application area boundary.

The ES includes full details of the findings of these surveys and provides an Ecological Impact Assessment. In summary this finds the following:

- The existing habitats on site are 95% arable of negligible ecological significance
- Other existing habitats on site are not considered to be Important Ecological Features (IEF) as the development footprint excludes all hedgerows, trees and grassland habitats
- The residual impact on habitats is assessed as positive significant effect at the Local level. There will be no direct impacts on designated sites and indirect impacts on the Culham Brake SSSI and the River Thames are considered unlikely due to separation distance
- A 30m standoff from badger setts will avoid disturbance and there will be no significant residual impact
- All trees as well as marginal and linear habitat features of roosting value to bats will be retained and protected during construction and operation. Some loss of low-value foraging habitat during construction phase. Residual positive significant effect at the Local level
- For breeding birds, the construction phase will involve some disturbance and loss of habitat but the operational phase introduces positive effects due to enhanced habitat mosaic, and the residual impact is a positive significant effect at the Local level.
- For both Otter and water vole, the scheme is assessed as having positive significant effects at the Local level.

It is therefore clear that the scheme has some neighbourhood/Local level negative effects during the initial phases and that these are outweighed by the benefits from the habitat

creation included in the proposals. In the long-term the development will have significant positive effect for habitats, breeding birds, bats, otter and water vole.

This scheme is therefore entirely in accordance with Saved policy PE5, and provides a net gain in biodiversity as required in emerging Core Policy C7 and paragraph 109 of the NPPF.

5.3 Heritage/archaeology

A heritage assessment is included in the ES. This considered both the application site and a wider study area of 1km around the site. The study identified known sites, events and designated sites within the Study Area. Heritage Assets were allocated a rating of sensitivity/importance, and an assessment of the magnitude of impact made. By combining both these ratings, an assessment of the significance of potential effects due to the proposed scheme is arrived at.

Within the site, only seven undesignated assets were identified, one being of importance, two being low, and four of very low importance. The potential effects on these is in one case, moderate and in all the others, Minor. Within the wider Study Area, 109 heritage assets were identified and the potential effects of the proposal is assessed as Minor for one of these and for all the other known assets, negligible.

Based on the result of nearby excavations, it is anticipated that potentially significant archaeological deposits and remains may be located within the site. The assessment confirms that it is possible to mitigate the effects of this development by appropriate monitoring, site stripping and recording/ excavating as appropriate and as agreed with the Oxfordshire County Archaeological Service.

The ES chapter identifies local and national planning policy relating to the site and shows compliance. It is also clear through this assessment that the proposal is compliant with both Saved OMWP policies PE8 and PE9 and the emerging Core Strategy.

5.4 Highways and transport

The proposed extension does not introduce any new types of traffic. It is an extension to an existing operation, carried out in the same way as at present. Mineral is transported to the processing plant by conveyor. There is an existing routeing agreement which stipulates routes to be used by aggregate road lorries to and from the processing plant. This avoids the B4016, and instead uses a private road southwards to the A4130 Didcot bypass and on to the A34. Therefore no significant additional vehicle movements are anticipated and this accords with Policy SC3. The Highways Authority have commented that the proposed extension is likely to have a negligible effect on the local highway network as it is simply a continuation of the existing. A copy of the routeing agreement is provided in Part 2 of the ES.

The site is in part next to a railway line and it is therefore necessary to demonstrate to Network Rail that the railway infrastructure will not be compromised. This was considered through a stability assessment report, which confirms the probability of the proposed excavations impacting on railway property and the embankment is very low. The full stability report is included in Part 2 of the ES.

5.5 Hydrology and flood risk

The ES includes a hydrogeology and hydrology assessment and flood risk assessment which reviews background information, identifies baseline conditions and considers potential impacts on groundwater, surface water and flooding.

Wet working techniques ensures groundwater levels around the excavation will not change from the pre-development situation. In the one Phase which is to be dry worked so that it can be restored back to agricultural land, the aquifer south of Phase 5 is extremely limited in extent.

Phases 6 and 7 are within Flood Zone 3 and the development is classed as “water compatible” and acceptable. The ES hydrology chapter notes that whilst the EA modelled 1% AEP (1 in 100 year) flood event is shown to inundate Phase 5, the 2007 historic flood event did not extend into this area, and perhaps indicates inaccuracies in the flood mapping. The pluvial flood risk within the application area is identified as very low.

The soil storage bunds around the perimeter of the workings are arranged generally in parallel to flood flow paths, and include significant gaps to allow any flood waters to pass through, therefore there will be no impedance of flow paths.

The agricultural restoration of Phase 5 is to a gently sloping landform which involves some loss of flood storage in this area. This is more than compensated for by storage in the Phase 4b void and detailed calculations have been carried out to demonstrate that there is level-for-level compensation storage.

Furthermore, the effect of the restoration is to provide a net increase in flood storage capacity within the Phase 6 and 7 areas of 119,493m³. This will provide flood alleviation across the site.

The assessment concludes that the proposed extension is not expected to have any residual effects on the groundwater or surface water regime; not increase flood risk within or beyond the site; and creates a flood alleviation benefit. It therefore accords with Policies PE4, PE5 and PE7.

5.6 Landscape and visual

A Landscape and visual assessment is included in the ES. This confirms that the site is in the National Character Area 108, the Upper Thames Clay Vales, and straddles two landscape character types identified in the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study – the ‘River Meadowlands’ and ‘Lowland village Farmlands’, and identifies that the Bridge Farm site is for the most part, typical of the ‘Lowland Village Farmlands’ type. The rural nature of the landscape is impacted by ongoing landfill operations to the east of Sutton Courtenay and by the dominant presence of Didcot Power Station to the south. The site is judged to have a low landscape sensitivity.

The LVIA established that the site’s zone of visual influence is mostly restricted to areas within relatively close proximity of the site boundary. Intervisibility between the site and the surrounding landscape is significantly constrained by the predominantly flat topography of the Thames floodplain, the raised railway embankment immediately to the east of the site, and by a succession of tall hedgerows, trees and linear woodland plantations within the local area. The LVIA considers that the site has the capacity to accommodate further mineral development without causing significant adverse landscape impact within the local area or wider environment.

During the operational phase of development, the extraction process will have a moderate/major impact at site level but in the wider character area, the effect will be minor/negligible. Similarly, visual effects are assessed as moderate where there are nearby views, and as views of the site within the wider landscape are very limited, visual impacts are predicted to be negligible.

The restored site will in part be back to agricultural land, which will therefore be a negligible impact, and with the additional hedgerow planting included as part of the proposals, this is assessed as a moderate beneficial impact on the character of the site. Similarly the restoration to lakes and wetland is anticipated to provide significant biodiversity enhancement, sympathetically integrating the restored site with the river corridor and areas of wetland restoration within the existing site.

The LVIA concludes that in the medium to long term, significant landscape and visual enhancement will be experienced over an extensive area to the east of Sutton Courtenay village, and this is predicted to have a major beneficial impact on the local landscape character.

5.7 Noise and dust

The existing operations are subject to conditions relating to noise, including noise limits at noise sensitive properties and during temporary operations. The Environmental Health Officer (EHO) for the local authority which advises the Mineral Planning Authority in this regard has agreed that the existing limit is suitable for all noise sensitive receptors, including a new residential development approved for a site to the south west of the extension area. A noise assessment was required to check that any quarry related noise due to the extension would be acceptable relative to the approved levels and this was confirmed to be the case: the noise assessment report is included in Part 2 of the ES.

Scoping discussions with the EHO have confirmed that no significant effects are anticipated as a result of dust as a range of control measures can be implemented effectively and controlled through conditions to a planning permission as is the case currently. Management practices such as are used in the existing quarry operations will be used in the extension, and a dust control scheme is included in Part 2 of the ES.

5.8 Socio-economic

In relation to amenity of local residents, these aspects are considered within the environmental aspects identified above. The consideration of planning policy in Section 3 has highlighted the economic importance of mineral working and need to maintain at least 7 years landbank and not all within a few large sites. The latest monitoring report (dated April 2016) identifies that the figures used are based on a Local Aggregate Assessment (LAA) which could not be updated as required by the NPPF paragraph 145, and estimates that OCC only has 7.2 years sand and gravel.

This extension is small in scale and duration, enabling realisation of the mineral resource within the local policy timeframe, and whilst necessary infrastructure is in place. Consultation has been carried out and all the feedback received on the proposed restoration was positive.

6. Conclusions

Extant policy identified the Sutton Courtenay area for mineral working, and the area is also identified in emerging local policy as a Minerals Strategic Resource Area. The proposal for a small extension to Bridge Farm quarry accords with saved policy PE2 and the desire to correct the current imbalance between sand and gravel supply being primarily in the north of the county, and need in the southern area. It offers a local source to meet local south Oxfordshire demand, and assists in maintaining the landbank as required by NPPF paragraph 145, and saved policy SD1.

The extension offers the opportunity to obtain the sand and gravel reserve whilst existing plant is in place to process it, and a purpose-designed transport route associated with that plant is available. This fully accords with saved policy SD10, the specific guidance in the NPPG paragraph 010, and the principles of sustainable development.

There are no designations affecting the site which act as constraints, and the assessments of environmental factors as required by saved policies have been carried out as part of an Environmental Impact Assessment process. Assessments have included a wide range of considerations, including: ecology; landscape and visual impacts; archaeology and flood risk.

These assessments have fully considered baseline conditions and potential impacts, and where appropriate, mitigation measures have been included in the proposed scheme. As a result, it is confirmed that there are no unacceptable adverse impacts on the natural and historic environment or human health, in accordance with NPPF paragraph 144.

The timeframe for the extension fits well within that provided for in saved policy SD2, and restoration is to be undertaken in a timely manner as required by saved policy PE13. The restoration proposed will return the best quality agricultural land area to agricultural use, and other areas to lakes and wetland, sympathetically integrating the restored site with the river corridor and areas of wetland restoration within the existing site.

Furthermore, the proposal incorporates measures which offer environmental enhancements, particularly:

- o additional hedgerow planting, and creation of landscapes which are in keeping with the local landscape character and accord with the landscape strategies and guidelines contained in the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS) for the area;
- o creation of new habitats which are anticipated to provide significant biodiversity enhancement;
- o a net gain in flood storage.

The proposal therefore offers the opportunity to contribute sustainably to the local demand for minerals; fully complies with both local and national policy and guidance, and offers environmental gains.