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To: Hearing Panel on Change of Status of Conservation Park
From: Gerry Kessels
Date: 10 March 2015
Re: RWSS – Revocation of Specially Protected Status and Land Exchange.

Introduction

The purpose of this memorandum is to clarify and respond to technical points made by Forest and Bird and the Te Taiao Environment Forum in their submissions on the proposal.

I confirm that I was the lead author of the Terrestrial Ecological Study (May 2013) Report ("TER") and the Smedley Exchange Block Ecological Survey (October 2013) Report ("SEB Report") referred to in these submissions. I also prepared a report dated June 2013 entitled "Department of Conservation Managed Land- Description of Ecological Effects" regarding the 22 ha Conservation Park Land at issue.

Full copies of these reports were filed by HBRIC Ltd with the application for land exchange, and are referred to in this memorandum on the understanding they are available to the Hearing Panel accordingly.

Forest & Bird submission

Paragraph 31 — This paragraph suggests there has been no assessment of fish species. This is not correct. I refer to sections 3.3.3 of the SEB Report where it states: "*Four larger streams run through the SEB, although none are as large as Dutch Creek. The lower sections of these streams would become inundated by the filling of the reservoir, while some of the upstream habitat would remain untouched. While no aquatic field surveys were conducted as part of this report, the ecological effects of the Scheme on the aquatic ecology of the Makaroro and Tukituki catchments have previously been assessed by Young et al. (2013)¹. In their report Young et al. (2013) describe that 12 freshwater fish species were detected within the Makaroro catchment (Table 3), of which five were classed as 'Declining'.*"

¹ Young RG, Allen C, Shearer KA, Doehring K, Berkett N, Holmes R, Hay J. 2013. Ruataniwha Water Storage Scheme – Aquatic Ecology Assessment of Effects. Prepared for Hawke's Bay Regional Investment Company Limited. Cawthron Report No. 2307. 194 p. plus appendices.

Paragraph 34 – The statement is repeated from the SEB Report that the Conservation Park 22 ha (“DOC Land”) contains 16% Acutely and 82% Chronically Threatened Environments (as assessed under the LENZ Threatened Environment Classification system (“TEC”). A similar point is made by Te Taiao.

As noted in the SEB Report, it was for this very reason, and because the areas of vegetation on the DOC Land are (generally) in a less modified ecological state than those habitats within the Smedley Exchange Block (“SEB”) land, and applying a ‘current values’ approach to conservation values, it was considered appropriate that the exchange land offered should be a larger area than that lost to achieve the enhancement test. In this case the area of land proposed for the exchange is indicatively 5.5 times larger than the area which would be flooded (subject to survey and fencing arrangements).

I note that the TEC is one tool in determining a focus for conservation and restoration management. It is useful at a broad landscape scale but once features at a smaller scale such as this have been identified then an assessment of significance accounting for broader matters come into play. We used broader significance evaluation criteria of the regional policy statement to assess values of the SEB—refer to section 3.6 of the SEB Report. 131 ha of ecologically significant vegetation has been identified within the SEB. On this broader basis I do not agree there this proposal involves ‘trading down’ as suggested in the Te Taiao submission.

I also note that of the extant indigenous vegetation remaining within the SEB, 29.95 ha fell within the ‘Chronically Threatened’ category, assigned to land environments of which only 10 – 20% remain within New Zealand which is greater than the 22ha of DOC land being lost alone. I note the Forest & Bird submission fails to mention the actual hectares involved.

Paragraph 35 – it is asserted that the TER records the oxbow wetland type does “not appear to be represented elsewhere in the Ruahine Forest Park” -. To clarify, to the best of my knowledge, no full survey of wetlands in the 94000 ha Park has been undertaken. Other similar wetlands may be present.

Table 1 in the SEB Report it records that 0.29 ha of wetland is located in the DOC land whereas 0.49 of seepage wetland in the SEB. The seepage wetland is hydrologically intact but is impacted by grazing. Importantly SEB report states “Blackberry, pasture grasses and common pasture herbs *dominate the margins and became less frequent towards the centre of these areas.*” I return to this below regarding the similar submission by Te Taiao.

Paragraph 39 (long-tailed bats) We have found long-tailed bats in the SEB – refer to section 3.3.2 of the TER : “*Forest edge habitat is a preferred feeding habitat for long-tailed bats and it has been found that the population detected within the Scheme footprint extends into beech forest found on the SEB*”. We did not determine whether bats were roosting in either the DOC Land or the SEB in the TER. They could be roosting in both blocks but furthers studies would be required to confirm. I return to this point below.

Te Taiao Submission

“Like for Like” – While I generally agree with the principle, I disagree that the principle has not been used. For example, the SEB block does have significant riparian vegetation, and much is on recent alluvial terraces. Refer to Figure 1 in SEB Report – Habitat Type 1 and parts of habitat Type 1, 10, 15, 14 are riparian and on alluvial terraces. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the seepage wetland area on the SEB has degraded edges, but is more intact in its core. With suitable fencing from stock and weed control it will revert to a largely indigenous wetland type relatively quickly.

It is then submitted that the vegetation diversity of Dutch Creek is “far greater than for the SEB”. No data are provided by the submitter to support this statement. I refer to section 4 of the SEB Report which states –“ *an ecologically highly valuable area of beech forest (some 4.4 ha excluding the portion flooded by the Scheme) was found at the northern extent of the SEB, which is considered to be at least*

as diverse as similar forest types found within Dutch Creek. This suggests that when fenced from stock grazing the indigenous areas presently grazed within the SEB will regenerate well". My emphasis.

Wetlands on cliffs are mentioned at the bottom of Page 3 of the submission, but the cliffs with vegetation types are actually on the true left bank of Dutch Creek, and from my review of the maps it appears that they are not part of the affected DOC land -see Figures 1 and 3 of the June 2013 report. Also see cover photo and Figure 2 of the SEB report. There are cliff habitats within the affected DOC land on the main stem of the Makaroro, which is listed as "vegetation type 24" in the Department of Conservation Managed Land- Description of Ecological Effects report. This is largely similar habitat to the cliff habitat "Type 10" mapped and described in the SEB Report.

The Te Taiao submission also refers to the presence of Threatened and At Risk species as identified in the TER, but not specifically within the SEB (as does the Forest and Bird submission). A key point is that extensive surveys were done for At risk and Threatened species as part of the TER report but at that time the SEB was not extensively surveyed as it wasn't affected. Extensive surveys were NOT undertaken for these species in the SEB report, but if undertaken it is likely that a number of threatened and at risk species would be found, including falcon and long-tailed bats – refer to section 3.4 of the SEB report and section 4 where it is stated : *"From a fauna perspective, previous surveys have found that twelve nationally Threatened and At Risk species frequent the area close to or within the SEB, including NZ bush falcon, long tailed bats and fernbird for example. In particular, previous surveys showed that long-tailed bats were found to utilize the margins of old growth beech forest within the SEB and it is considered likely that bats are roosting in the 82.12 ha of beech forest and beech treeland. Once suitable wetland vegetation along the lake margin has been restored, North Island fernbird, a nationally At Risk – Declining species, could also utilize parts of the SEB as habitat."*

Beyond that, relative benefits of the SEB for the Conservation Park are recorded in the SEB Report (section 4). These benefits include:

"..the exchange land has a number of features not readily apparent. For example, it would form a buffer and corridor along the newly formed lake and create linkages of a range of representative vegetation types with the Gwavas Conservation Area to the east (refer to Figure 16). If stock are excluded and pests controlled within the SEB land, it would provide higher quality habitat than currently exists for virtually all of the At Risk and Threatened indigenous fauna species within this locality, as well as for a range of more widespread species, such as bellbird, tui and whitehead."

As to mistletoe specifically, I agree with the DOC reviewing technical advisor that (as had been discussed with Mr Carlton) this species is relatively widespread in the ecological district and with suitable relocation, would establish in suitable habitat within the SEB and benefit from pest control (possum grazing being a key existing threat to any mistletoe elsewhere within the Conservation Park at present).

Gerry Kessels

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