

Snow farm consents process for review

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By Dave Smith

The Otago Conservation Board plans to look into the consent processes used by the Commissioner of Crown Lands and the Queenstown-Lakes District Council for the development and freeholding of Waiorau Snow Farm.

Last Friday, the board held its meeting at Waiorau, in the Cardrona Valley, and on Saturday had a tour of the facility with snow farm owner John Lee.

The board's planned action appears to be in response to a public forum speech by former board member Mike Floate.

Dr Floate criticised the board and Waiorau owners John and Mary Lee about the "severe maltreatment of the landscape".

During his speech, Dr Floate acknowledged the Lees' work in terms of economic benefit from the snow farm's winter operations as an international vehicle and tyre testing ground.

However, he questioned the board whether the extensive earthworks were legal under land tenure ownership.

Yesterday, in a statement, board chairman Les Cleveland said his board welcomed the tenure review agreement between the Commissioner of Crown Lands and the Lees.

Under the recently signed agreement, about 4000ha of high country on the Pisa Range would become public conservation land.

Mr Cleveland said the board had no direct influence on the agreement and no effective role in the tenure review process, but had been kept informed by the Department of Conservation.

"The board acknowledged that the generally pleasing outcome for conservation had been achieved at a price."

However, Mr Cleveland said the board was concerned about the large scale of earth disturbance on the property at high altitude as well as the potential for serious erosion and siltation of the upland bogs, streams and headwaters of the Roaring Meg Stream.

"Effective action would need to be taken soon to prevent these problems," he said.

The board was also concerned about the consent processes which were followed to obtain authorisation for the earthworks. It planned to investigate the processes used by the (Queenstown-Lakes) council and the Commissioner of Crown Lands.

Mr Lee said the Saturday tour had been well received and was very cordial.

The major impact on the landscape was confined to about 40ha of land which included a base lodge, testing sheds and tracks and Nordic cross-country ski trails.

A check with the council's planning contractor, Civic Corp, showed that Waiorau had gone through the required consent process.

Mr Lee would not be drawn on the board's statement, except to say he had received some positive comments from several board members during the tour.

The winter testing facility injected millions of dollars into the national and local economy.