



13 January 2010

Hon Dr Nick Smith
Minister for the Environment
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

Re: Proposed dairy farms in the Mackenzie Basin

Dear Hon Dr Smith

I am writing to you regarding the proposed dairy farms in the Mackenzie Basin. I understand that Dr. Bryan Jenkins, Chief Executive of Environment Canterbury, recently wrote to you asking whether it was possible to 'call in' associated resource consent applications. These were to store and discharge effluent, and to excavate land and discharge contaminants to air, by three corporate dairy farming companies.

In April last year I released my report *Change in the high country: Environmental stewardship and tenure review*. I made two recommendations that appear relevant to this current situation.

The first of these relates to the issue of call-ins, where I recommended that:

"The Minister for the Environment calls in development applications that are proposals of national significance due to their potential for significant adverse effects on lakes or outstanding landscapes in the high country."

These proposed dairy farms are the kind of development envisaged in my recommendation.

It is my understanding that these proposals involve housing around 17,000 cows on 8,000 hectares of land in the catchments of the Ohau and Ahuriri rivers. The combined effluent of these operations would be similar in quantity to that of a city the size of Christchurch being located in the Mackenzie Basin.

There are good reasons to be concerned. A recent report from NIWA suggests that if the amount of nutrients entering Lake Benmore was to substantially increase (such as under the scenario above) then the water quality in Lake Benmore and the lower Waitaki River would be likely to seriously deteriorate.¹ Such a result would be highly undesirable – especially as this region is popular for tourism and recreation.

In addition, there may be implications for electricity generation from the Waitaki Power Scheme. Meridian has submitted evidence that nutrient enrichment could have significant adverse effects on the operation of the Waitaki Power Scheme, possibly with national consequences.

¹ Norton *et al.*, 2009. *Lake Benmore water quality: a modelling method to assist with limits for nutrient loadings*, report CHC2009-091 to Environment Canterbury, NIWA, Christchurch.

It may take several years for groundwater contaminated with nutrients to enter Lake Benmore. Any adverse effects resulting from discharges could persist for many years regardless of any remedial action taken. Suitable controls are essential to keep the cumulative effects of effluent discharges within acceptable limits. In my view, decisions of this importance should be taken at a national level.

Being able to take a strategic overview to examine multi-faceted issues such as those facing the Mackenzie Basin is vital. It is also why I made my recommendation regarding the introduction of a High Country Commission:

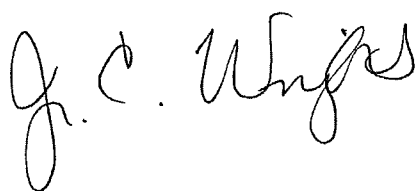
“The Government establishes a High Country Commission for a fixed period to advise on all significant aspects of the public interest in tenure review and in the high country more generally.”

I believe that a High Country Commission would be well placed to provide the Government and regional councils with the advice and wider perspective required to assist good decision-making.

Some commentators and submitters have also raised concerns regarding impacts of the proposed activities on animal welfare and on New Zealand's image overseas. However, I have not formed any opinion on these matters, and I would not expect that they can be taken into account in Resource Management Act decisions.

I believe that the potential effects on water quality alone, are of such national significance as to justify calling in these resource consent applications. I urge you to take up Environment Canterbury's invitation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. C. Wright'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Jan Wright
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment