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Report to the Landcare and Utility Services Committees
from Councillor Euan McQueen

Future Land Use and Land Management in the Pakuratahi Catchment

1. Purpose

This paper is prepared as a personal commentary on the above issues. The writer serves on both Committees (and as Chairman of Utility Services) and is acutely aware of the potential conflicts between the respective goals of the two Committees in the management of this Catchment. The aim of this paper is to focus debate on critical longer term issues, and to enable the Council to reach policy conclusions which will enable an optimum balance between the roles of conservation, biodiversity protection, recreation and heritage values, and plantation forestry (see map, Attachment 1).

2. Background

Purchase of land in the Pakuratahi Catchment goes back many years. Until 1955, the Wellington - Masterton railway ran through the Catchment, for much of the route close to the river. When the railway closed (in October 1955), to be replaced by the Rimutaka Tunnel and associated deviation, the former right-of-way was converted to a service road, using adapted bridges and existing tunnels, from a point close to the former Kaitoke Railway Station to Summit. The right-of-way from Summit to Cross Creek remained as a foot track, and has been owned and managed by the then Department of Lands and Survey, then the Department of Conservation.

Plantation forestry activity was in vogue in the 1950s and 60s, and considerable plantings were made by the then Wellington Regional Water Board within the Catchment in the period 1958-1971. At the time, the railway right-of-way was seen as the access route for logging; recreational use, other than tramping, was not foreseen. There was then no other road access to the Catchment.

Over the years, the value of the former railway route as a walkway (and more recently for mountain bikes) has become very apparent, and planning began in the 1980s to upgrade the track to walkway standards, i.e., provision of toilets, shelter and so on. In 1987, the track from Kaitoke to Summit was officially opened, with interpretative panels and other facilities, in response to a growing public demand. The most recent figures have some 32,300 people in 1998/99 using the Rimutaka Incline Track, with several major events taking place each year. It is now highly regarded as a trip for most age groups, by foot or mountain bike, with an even gradient, good surface (now damaged in places), and in many areas quality scenery. (The 1998/99 figure was 2,500 down on the previous year; this is attributed to the impact of logging operations.)

3. **Heritage Value**

This deserves particular comment, in light of changes in public perceptions over the last four decades. When the Incline railway route closed, there was a collective sigh of relief at the improved rail access to the Wairarapa and the abandonment of an expensive and difficult to operate railway. In the following years, a small group worked on restoring one of the Fell locomotives, and slowly the perception grew that the Incline and its remnants was a site of national and indeed international heritage significance. Of the four railways world-wide using the Incline technology, the Rimutaka was the only one to last more than ten years, and to survive into the 20th century. The local historical significance has been well captured by the Fell Museum at Featherston. A recent book (published in UK) has given the works of J B Fell international significance in technological history. There are now visitors who come to visit the area for its industrial archaeological significance as much as any other reason.

4. **Summary So Far**

The events of the last half century - railway closure, plantation forestry, now logging, increase in recreation and related values - have all taken place quite reasonably and logically in the context of contemporary policies. What is emerging now, however, are clear conflicts in land use, confused environmental standards, public recreational versus institutional demands (e.g., logging), and perceptions about the enhancement of broader recreational qualities. These need to be examined in more detail.

5. **The Role of Plantation Forestry**

In the context of policies and practices of the 1950s and 1960s, it was entirely reasonable to plant pine forests in what was then regarded as essentially waste land - such as areas of the Pakuratahi Catchment. The former railway right-of-way provided access for planting and logging, with some minor additional branch roads having to be built later for logging.

Modern forestry practice might not have seen planting on some of the areas, especially higher altitude areas (e.g., above the Summit Tunnel, where trees will never be cropped) - but at the time, and given the then state of knowledge and enthusiasm it was all quite logical. It has to be recorded, however, that soils in the area, depleted by regular fires, are very poor. It is, at best, very marginal country for commercial forestry.

The Council has recently reviewed its continuing involvement in Plantation Forestry, on which there is not currently an economic return. The logs coming from the Pakuratahi Catchment are of widely varying quality; the constraints on using the walkway for logging has required expensive alternative road construction, and in the process (and inevitably) destruction and damaged to indigenous bush cover along those routes. Further such road construction will be needed to extract some stands.

There is now a need to assess the effects of these changes alongside other values, all of which are included in the Council's Forest Lands Water Collection Area Interim Management Plan 1996.

6. **Landscape Values**

The landscape setting for the walkway is varied, attractive, and at times majestic, ranging from valley landscapes at the Kaitoke end to what would be to many people mountain (as at least sub-montane) landscapes at Summit. The Incline landscape (Summit to Cross Creek) is formidable, stark, and striking - to a fair degree it is still reminiscent of the land cover when the railway operated, as much a result of regular burning as the skeletal soils and extreme climate.

The same cannot be said for the Pakuratahi area. Cut-over and previously burned native bush has regrown, providing an attractive setting; pine forest occupies selected blocks, casting their customary gloomy presence - but all adding to a variety of landscapes. However, this variety and quality has been severely compromised by the felling of several pine blocks, which is visually detrimental. Most felled blocks have been replanted, with slow greening of the landscape within a few years of planting. The detritus of logging is clearly visible.

The impact of planned logging beyond Ladle Bend will be severe in visual terms; the landscape is more intimate, and the inevitable waste left after logging will not be attractive, especially where it is beside the walkway. Again, landscape values have been, or will be, compromised (see Attachment 2).

In one area near Prices Tunnel, riparian areas have been severely damaged by logging, and probably unnecessarily so. Public comment on this point, so far only anecdotal, is critical.

The Council needs to decide, in terms of its own landscape guidelines (currently being developed) what it wants in this area for the longer term future. At present, standards in the catchment are very mixed, essentially as a result of logging.

7. **Conservation and Catchment Management**

A critical element in catchment management is sound vegetation and soil management (and the associated protection of ecosystems). It would seem reasonable that vegetation cover which is natural to the area (i.e., indigenous) and which is not clear felled every thirty years or so, would provide a better solution than plantation forestry. The question of plans for long-term vegetation cover in this, a planned future catchment area, needs to be well tested.

The cutting of a logging road through an area of rare manuka swamp above Ladle Bend sits poorly with WRC's stand on ecological protection and biodiversity.

8. **Recreation**

Many of the points about the growing recreation values have been covered in earlier parts of this paper. There are, however, some particularities which need to be examined.

The condition of the walkway has deteriorated markedly in places as a result of logging operations. The short section used by logging trucks in the lower valley has not only damaged the surface, but earthworks have destroyed the original formation levels and, in a few minor areas, alignment.

From the lower valley, use of the walkway by contractors service vehicles (not logging trucks) has turned the surface from a walkway to that of an industrial road, with large potholes. As a cycle track it is a challenge - as a walkway it is unpleasant, especially after rain. The contrast between this length and that beyond Ladle Bend, which is used only occasionally by WRC vehicles, is stark - it is, in effect, a track of quite different character.

9. **Heritage**

This too has been dealt with in earlier sections. A Heritage and Conservation Plan has been produced for Landcare, which sets out the features which should, over time, be protected. The railway formation itself is a critical element. The recreation and protection of Summit yard area (now largely planted with pine trees which are, in a few areas, destroying heritage features) is a critical issue to address.

The marking and restoration of selected heritage features is a long-term task, which has had a modest start. Continuing progress, as planned, will bring enhanced interest to the walkway.

10. Summary

It should be clear by now that there are actual and potential conflicts between various Council policies and practices in the Pakuratahi Catchment. I repeat, and emphasise, this has not come about as a result of anything other than reasonably applied decisions over the years; what has changed, and increasingly so in recent years, has been the framework within which these practices are being applied. The two separate streams of WRC activity - recreation/environmental conservation, and plantation forestry, are now in actual and potential conflict in their effects on each other. This represents a considerable challenge to both Divisions, and to the Council, to reach policy decisions, and quickly, which will determine the qualities of the Catchment for the foreseeable and long-term future. These decisions will need to be made in the context of overarching Council policies on conservation, environmental protection standards, and our degree of commitment to national policies on biodiversity.

There is already a small, but not insignificant, critical comment from our public about what is happening in the Pakuratahi. Unless action is seen to occur, I judge that this criticism will escalate to newspaper articles and broader based protests. Such criticism will be very hard to defend if we are to give serious meaning and weight to our broader environmental goals.

11. Conclusion

The critical question to answer is:

- *what do we want the catchment to look like, and what Council goals do we want it to reflect, in year 2025?*

When this question is answered, the means to achieve the answer can then be determined. If we concentrate exclusively on dealing with issues first, i.e., the means to the end, without defining the ends (goals) we are committing ourselves to years of expensive, time consuming and largely unproductive debate.

12. Recommendations

- (1) *That the Utility Services and Landcare Committees receive this report, and note its contents.*
- (2) *That the Committees discuss and, if practical, determine their goals for the Pakuratahi Catchment for year 2025.*
- (3) *That subject to discussion and decisions at the two Committees, this report be forwarded to Policy and Finance Committee with joint recommendations from the two Committees.*

- (4) *That the principles and criteria set out in the Interim Management Plan for Forest Land Management be taken into account on determining future land use in the Catchment.*

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Councillor

Attachment 1 : Pakuratahi Catchment, *Signature Values*

Attachment 2 : Photo Montage, Incline Walkway before and after logging