

COMMENT ON SUGAR BOWL LIFT REPLACEMENT AND TRAIL WORKS – RASTUS BURN RECREATION RESERVE BY NZSKI LIMITED

Introduction

This report provides comment on natural character and landscape elements in regard to the Sugar Basin lift and trail works application by NZSKI Ltd. The ski area and proposed work were inspected on the February 19, 2019.

The following briefing notes have been provided:

‘that our interest is related to consideration of this under provisions of the Reserves Act, the Conservation Act and the Otago CMS.

The Department as administrator of the Recreation Reserve is required to consider wider natural character/landscapes elements. The Department is seeking some high level context to inform the decision maker of the effects of the new trailworks to the natural landscapes and natural character of the Rastus Burn Rec Reserve, noting the E3 report, the extent of existing modification present, and this latest proposal in that context”.

Landscape and visual effects considerations and assessment

Consideration of landscape and visual effects comprises two parts.

- the visual effects of the development from public places.
- the assessment of landscape effects. This deals with the effects of change on the landscape as a resource – the elements that make up the landscape, the aesthetic and perceptual aspects of the landscape and its distinctive character.

Context:

The Rastus Burn Recreation Reserve is set within the wider Remarkables /Hector Mountains. It is included within the Wakatipu Basin Outstanding Natural Landscape (ONL) and has its own Remarkables Ski Area Subzone in the Queenstown Lakes District Plan ODP and PDP. Both the Recreation Reserve and the ski area subzone allow for skifield development.

The Rastus Burn (RB) Basin forms an alpine cirque basin comprises 4 main areas

- Shadow Basin
- Lake Alta and surrounds
- Alta shirt front (Curvy Basin) straddling either side of the Rastus Burn stream
- Sugar Bowl

The basin overall retains a reasonably high level of natural character despite over 30 years of skifield use and development. Existing Skifield infrastructure contributes to a modified landscape which exists within the context of a larger natural landscape. Natural patterns and processes still dominate over modified areas despite the extent of skifield development.

Ongoing development creep is nevertheless eroding the natural character and consequently impacting on landscape values. The Curvy Basin chair and notably the trail development has been the most significant recent development and has impacted on natural character probably more than other individual development.

Apart from the Base building and learners slope area, upper Sugar Bowl appears the most modified part of the Recreation Reserve. The headwall enclosing upper Sugar Bowl however is untouched.

Issues

- Landscape and visual effects of chairlift and installation
- Effects of new and significant trail works.
- Can effects of chairlift and trail be absorbed or will it exceed the absorption capability to the point where natural character is compromised and the combined cumulative effects¹ taking into account all development will tip the balance to the point that natural character becomes subservient to ski area development.
- Insufficient landscape resource data to provide a framework by which the proposal can be evaluated. Gaps include what are the significant landscape characteristics and features of the RB Basin, which areas are most sensitive/vulnerable to landscape change, which areas have been modified/ disturbed. No overall Development/Management Plan by which individual applications can be assessed within the context of an overall comprehensive plan.
- Can earthworks mitigation reduce effects to make it acceptable and can the development be integrated with the landscape to minimise effects on natural character. Is the proposed trail development the best option?
- Summer recreation and use

Assessment of Sugar Bowl application

The current level of ski area development has a significant effect on landscape and natural character. Given that it is a skifield it has not in my view reached a threshold or saturation point where no further development can occur. New development does however need to be carefully assessed to ensure it integrates with the natural character and features and does not overwhelm it and is part of a cohesive and well thought out long term plan.

a) Chairlift and associated infra-structure

The proposed Sugar Bowl replacement chairlift siting appears logical operationally for facilitating access and the potential of the Sugar Bowl basin. I agree with the Patch landscape assessment report findings that the chairlift and buildings can be absorbed within the context of the existing ski area

¹ Definition of Cumulative Effects

Cumulative effects are defined as:

'the additional changes caused by a proposed development with other similar developments. (GLVIA3)

development and infrastructure in regard to visual effects. Also that there will be minimal or only very minor effects beyond the immediate RB Basin. Visual effects are contained to the Rastus Burn Basin in the context of the existing chairlifts and structures and the chairlift infrastructure and buildings can be absorbed within the context of the existing ski infrastructure. It has also to be said that there would be less landscape effects if the replacement lift was located in the location of the existing Sugar chairlift (and utilized existing trails and disturbance).

b) Trail works and earthworks

The trail works and earthworks represent a greater threat to natural character and landscape values. The Patch landscape assessment does not address the effects of the proposed trail works on the landscape resource of RB Basin including effects on natural character. As discussed above natural character and naturalness is a key aspect of the landscape values of the RB Basin and retention and the continued dominance of natural character is important.

The proposed trails include two main trails, Sugar Trail and Sugar Stash Trail. The Sugar Trail extends from the base lift terminal traversing an open tussocked slope and merging with the Casterway Trail. The Sugar Stash trail at the top end forms a double trail extending down from the top terminal merging to become a single 30m trail down through predominantly boulderfield and scree at the toe of the main range to the north, then cutting across a steep slope below Upper Gallery down and around a plateau and down the final section forming the lower face above the main carpark and base building.

In regard to the upper trail section, upper Sugar Bowl is the most modified area apart from the base building and learners slope (as discussed). The upper Sugar Stash trail coincides with some of this disturbed zone but also includes significant new or unmodified areas. The unmodified zone is predominantly boulderfield, rock and scree in the upper part of the Sugar Stash. The alignment of the trail at the toe of the main slope assists with integrating the trail in this location. Nevertheless there will be significant modification to the boulderfield /scree and vegetation patterns within the upper trail construction corridor and furthermore it is unclear why the Sugar Stash Trail could not have utilized more of the existing modification associated with the Serpentine Trail. There may be sound reasons for this but it is not obvious.

The higher impact areas of the terrain works are the lower trails (for both Sugar Trail and Sugar Stash) which traverse largely intact and undisturbed tussock areas and in an area which is highly visible from the main carpark, base building and importantly the well-used track to Lake Alta by summer recreational users.

Questions

- Are major trail works acceptable/appropriate within the RB Basin? In recent years this appears to have been relaxed.
- Are the lower trails location the best and only option for the trail (operationally and environmentally) and are there other options?

- Are two trails down to the base lift station justified? Could the Sugar Stash trail link more significantly with the Sugar Trail and delete the lower Sugar Stash section (this would significantly reduce the overall impact).

Other considerations are to ensure existing access tracks are either incorporated into the new trail to avoid duplication of access tracks and trail or existing access track are removed and natural ground reinstated. Secondly to avoid cutting temporary access tracks to remove the existing Sugar Bowl lift towers.

Recommendations and Conclusions

1. The RB basin overall retains a reasonably high degree of natural character despite over 30 years of skifield use and development.
2. Development creep and gradual erosion of natural character, plus lack of information on the landscape resource of the RB Basin and the absence of a comprehensive long term development/management plan are issues and make it difficult to assess individual applications.
3. The location of the Sugar Bowl replacement chairlift appears operationally a logical redevelopment and can be absorbed within the RB Basin without overwhelming natural character and landscape values or tipping the balance of cumulative effects.
4. The trail modification works represent the higher threat to natural character and landscape values in particular the lower trail sections but also the upper Sugar Stash section. It is recommended that options for reducing the extent of trail modifications are further explored including those outlined in this report.

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