

6<sup>th</sup> June 2025

**To:** Department of Conservation  
Te Papa Atawhai

Tēnā koutou,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed lease renewals for the Lower Selwyn Huts. You've asked Taumutu Rūnanga to provide a view on whether the Department should extend these leases.

We are firmly of the view that the Department should not renew the leases beyond a final five-year term. This reflects the growing environmental vulnerability of the site, the significance of Te Waihora to Ngāi Tahu as a tribal taonga, and the Department's statutory and Treaty-based obligations as co-governor.

#### **Significance of Te Waihora**

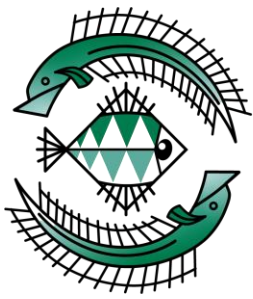
Te Waihora is the largest lake in Canterbury and one of Aotearoa's most important wetland ecosystems. It has long served as a major mahinga kai, a vital food basket, and a source of spiritual and cultural identity for Ngāi Tahu, and Ngāi Te Ruahikihiki. In recognition of that significance, the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998 vested the bed of the lake in Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, and established the Te Waihora Joint Management Plan; the first statutory land management partnership between the Crown and an iwi. The Department is a party to that plan and shares responsibility for restoring the mana and mauri of the lake.

Ngāi Tahu and mana whenua have invested considerable time and resources in this kaupapa through numerous programmes including the Whakaora Te Waihora programme, and more recently through a coordinated Co-Governance Strategy and Action Plan. These frameworks make clear that our collective goal is to restore the ecological and cultural health of Te Waihora, not entrench legacy arrangements that compromise that objective.

#### **Restoration Aspirations and Flood Risk**

As presented in evidence to the Waitangi Tribunal's Freshwater and Geothermal (Wai 2358) inquiry, Te Taumutu Rūnanga has publicly stated its aspiration to raise the lake level to 1.8 metres to support wetland regeneration and the return of more natural lake dynamics. This is a critical part of our long-term restoration vision.

However, the Lower Selwyn Huts are situated on low-lying public conservation land highly vulnerable to flooding. Since 2013, at least three major flood events have occurred (May 2025, May 2021, June 2023). Climate modelling by NIWA and Aqualinc (commissioned by Selwyn District Council) shows that sea-level rise and wind-driven lake displacement will further increase this risk. Maintaining residential infrastructure in this location is simply not sustainable.



### **On Wastewater Improvements**

We acknowledge that the hut community has installed vaulted wastewater systems, with regular pump-out servicing by certified contractors. This is a welcome improvement, aligned with agreement reached during the last lease renewal decision, and we respect the efforts made by residents to meet environmental standards.

However, this infrastructure only addresses one aspect of the broader environmental footprint. It does not change the unsuitability of the location, nor align with Ngāi Tahu's aspiration to restore lake levels, or the need to retire sensitive lake margins from intensive or incompatible use. Wastewater compliance is not a basis for permanent occupation.

### **Concerns with the Current Recommendation**

We do not support DOC's summary report recommendation a 10-year lease extension. In our view, this:

- Breaches previous commitments made to Ngāi Tahu that leases would not continue indefinitely;
- Undermines the co-governance relationship, treating Ngāi Tahu values as one of many "balancing" factors rather than a Treaty-based foundation;
- Conflicts with policy 10(h) of the Conservation General Policy, which anticipates the phasing out of private accommodation on conservation land;
- Increases future cost and complexity when decisions about removal must inevitably be made.

Ten years creates a false sense of permanency. A further extension risks turning what was intended as a managed retreat into a de facto long-term settlement arrangement, at odds with DOC's obligations and our shared restoration goals.

We acknowledge that some residents consider the huts to have heritage or sentimental value. However, there is no formal recognition of the Lower Selwyn Huts as a heritage site under the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014, nor has any independent heritage assessment been undertaken.

We do not believe this provides sufficient justification to override the lake's ecological and cultural restoration priorities.

### **Our Recommendation**

We strongly urge the Department to:

1. Limit any lease renewal to a maximum of five years, with no further right of renewal; and



# Taumutu Rūnanga Limited

Taumutu Rūnanga Limited  
75 Main South Road, Riccarton  
Christchurch, 8042  
Waea: 03 371 2660  
Imera: taumutu@ngaitahu.iwi.nz

2. Work alongside Taumutu Rūnanga Ltd, Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, Selwyn District Council, and hut residents to design and implement a managed retreat and restoration plan.

Ending the leases will not be easy. Delaying a difficult decision does not make it better for anyone, instead it compounds the risk and undermines the credibility of DOC's co-governance obligations under section 4 of the Conservation Act.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department to discuss this further and ask you reach out to our Tumu Whakarae (Chief Executive) s 9(2)(a)

Nāku iti nei, nā

s 9(2)(a)

Chair  
Taumutu Rūnanga Limited

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