

21 November 2025

OIA Ref: OIAD-5774

Tēnā koe [REDACTED],

Thank you for your request to the Department of Conservation (DOC), received on 23 October 2025, in which you asked for:

“..information on any DOC involvement in maintenance or funding for the Wairau–Hanmer Springs Hydro Road (Rainbow Road) that passes through or alongside public conservation land.

Specifically:

- 1. Any contracts, invoices, or internal work orders for grading, bridge repair, drainage, or slip clearance on this road between 2015 and 2025.*
- 2. Any agreements or correspondence with Rainbow Station Ltd, Transpower NZ Ltd, or Marlborough District Council about access or maintenance of this route.*
- 3. Any policy or management documents describing DOC’s role or responsibilities for keeping this road open to the public. “*

We have considered your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the OIA).

Before proceeding to the Department’s response, we have provided some relevant contextual information.

‘Road’ between State Highway 63 and Hanmer Springs

The route between State Highway 63 and Hanmer Springs is made up of several sections, not necessarily following the ‘unformed legal roads’ due to the topography they traverse and with some sections following an easement in favour of Transpower for accessing their pylons.

Depending on the route taken between the two points noted, the sections include those known as Rainbow Road, Molesworth Rainbow Road, Tophouse Road, Wairau Hanmer Springs Hydro Road, Tophouse Road, Clarence Road, Lake Tennyson Road and Jollies Pass Road.

Parts of the Rainbow Road section is located in Molesworth Recreation Reserve and the Upper Wairau River area in the Marlborough region. Please note the information detailed through the following links on the Department's website:

Rainbow Road (Hanmer Springs to St Arnaud): Molesworth Recreation Reserve, Marlborough region | <https://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-go/marlborough/places/molesworth-reserve/things-to-do/tracks/rainbow-road-hanmer-springs-to-st-arnaud/>

Molesworth Recreation Reserve map | <https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/parks-and-recreation/places-to-visit/nelson-marlborough/molesworth-map.pdf>

The route is referred to as a 'wilderness driving' experience across private land.

The 112-kilometre road from Hanmer to St Arnaud (via Tophouse Road and Wairau Hanmer Springs Hydro Road) is accessible by high-clearance 4WD vehicles only.

Passes in the Upper Wairau Valley were part of overland routes historically used by Māori. High country graziers moving mobs of sheep between Canterbury and Nelson/Marlborough later built a chain of cob houses. The 'road' was built in the 1950s when electricity pylons were built through the area to supply electricity to the Nelson and Buller regions.

The roads and tracks have not been engineered, nor are they maintained to meet the standards for public access. Hazards are not individually signposted or marked. Sudden weather changes can cause additional adverse conditions and/or additional hazards.

Access to the whole route is usually seasonal – late December through to mid-late April.

The section(s) that pass through the Rainbow Pastoral Lease land are tolled by the lessee, Rainbow Station Farms Limited (Rainbow Station).

Access by the public is solely on the basis that each person: travels at their own risk; accepts full responsibility for their own safety; and accepts that the owners of the land traversed have no liability or responsibility of any sort for any injury, damage or accident to any person or property that occurs while driving the 'route'.

Before travelling, an access form is required to be completed. It is recommended that a check is also made to find out if any permits are necessary and the various parts of the route are open.

Formed/Unformed legal roads

An unformed legal road is a parcel of land that has been legally designated as a road but has not been formed. Formed means physically constructed and includes gravelling, metalling, sealing or permanently surfacing the road. (No new unformed legal roads have been created since the 1950s.)

Territorial authorities have power to do whatever is necessary to construct and maintain any road under its control. They are responsible for unformed legal roads where they own the land, as they are the road controlling authority. However, they have no obligation to physically form or maintain these roads (but must take due care if they undertake any artificial work like building a culvert or bridge).

The Department may have management issues with roads. For example, it is permitted to propose stopping them (particularly unformed legal roads) and incorporating them into a National Park if they are not essential for legal access to other land (see General Policy for National Parks (pp 48-49). If the road is stopped and becomes part of a reserve, it is not usually available for public (vehicular) use without an activity permit or concession.

The three territorial authorities within the vicinity of the route each have policies about roading - including unformed legal roads.

Tasman District Council

Roading policies | Tasman District Council | <https://www.tasman.govt.nz/my-council/key-documents/more/transport/roading-policies> (refer to Chapter 11: *Partially Formed Legal Roads that are not Maintained*)

Marlborough District Council

Unformed Legal Roads Management Policy: [Document title](#) |

<https://www.marlborough.govt.nz/repository/libraries/id:2ifzri1o01cxbymxkvwz/hierarchy/documents/services/roads-and-transport/Unformed%20Legal%20Roads%20Management%20Policy%20-%20August%202024.pdf>

Hurunui District Council

[Unformed-Legal-Roads-Policy.pdf](#) |

https://www.hurunui.govt.nz/repository/libraries/id:23wyoavbi17q9ssstcjd/hierarchy/Support_Services/Policies/Roads%20and%20streets/Unformed-Legal-Roads-Policy.pdf

Approach to request

Care has been taken while preparing the Department's response and any documents supplied as part of the response.

This is due to the fact the Department is currently involved in litigation about the legal status of 'Molesworth Roads'. In particular, whether they are public legal roads vested in the relevant Council(s), or simply road formations on public conservation land.

While every effort has been made to identify and provide you with a complete list of what the Department holds in your areas of specific interest, we note limitations to the availability of information for a range of reasons. Since 2015, there have been revised policies and processes, different record keeping practices, new information management systems, files and information sent to Archives New Zealand, and staff turnover.

Department's response

Your specific questions and our responses are listed below.

Where we note information is not held, or information has not been located following searches, those parts of your request are refused under section 18(e) of the OIA, as the information does not exist.

1. *Any contracts, invoices, or internal work orders for grading, bridge repair, drainage, or slip clearance on this road between 2015 and 2025.*

Despite searches, no documentation has been located specific to this part of your request.

The Department does maintain that part of the route that leads to the Rainbow Station from Sedgemere (that we refer to as the Molesworth Rainbow Road).

2. *Any agreements or correspondence with Rainbow Station Ltd, Transpower NZ Ltd, or Marlborough District Council about access or maintenance of this route.*

The Department does not undertake any maintenance of the Rainbow Road that passes through the Rainbow Pastoral Lease land.

Further, we are not aware of any contracts for maintenance or any correspondence with Rainbow Station regarding maintenance or keeping the route open.

The Department's only use of the route is for occasional maintenance of huts, tracks, bridges and so forth and for periods of kea work and weed control, that can be accessed from the route.

It is understood that Transpower Limited maintains its pylon access roads along the easement granted in its favour.

3. *Any policy or management documents describing DOC's role or responsibilities for keeping this road open to the public.*

We note the draft Minutes/File Note from a meeting in 2021 about the route, along with (dated) maps showing the tenures (of the land and the route). This illustrates that the use and management of the route is complex and involves a number of parties.

There does not appear to have been follow up through the Department concerning the meeting and/or the proposed action points.

There is information about the Department's general approach to roading activities at the following link: [Procurement strategy for roading activities: Our policies and plans](https://www.doc.govt.nz/about-us/our-policies-and-plans/roading-strategy/) | <https://www.doc.govt.nz/about-us/our-policies-and-plans/roading-strategy/>

I have decided to release the documents listed in the attached Document schedule, subject to information being withheld under one or more of the following sections of the OIA, as applicable:

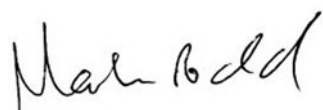
- section 9(2)(a) – to protect the privacy of natural persons, including deceased people,
- section 9(2)(b)(ii) – to protect the commercial position of the person who supplied the information, or who is the subject of the information,
- section 9(2)(g)(i) – to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs by enabling free and frank expression, and
- section 9(2)(h) - to maintain legal professional privilege.

In making my decision, I have considered the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the OIA and determined there are no public interests that outweigh the grounds for withholding.

You are entitled to seek an investigation and review of my decision by writing to an Ombudsman as provided by section 28(3) of the OIA.

Please note that this letter (with your personal details removed) and attached documents may be published on the Department's website.

Nāku noa, nā



Martin Rodd
Director, Regional Operations, Northern South Island
Department of Conservation | *Te Papa Atawhai*

Document schedule

Item	Date	Document description	Decision
01	23 March 2021	Draft Minutes/File Note of Rainbow Road Meeting and proposed Action Points	Released in part
02	March 2021	Maps of route showing its location, the boundaries for the territorial authorities, and the different parts of the route with which the various parties are involved	Released in full