

IN THE MATTER of the Resource Management Act
1991

AND

IN THE MATTER McKenzie District Council proposed
Plan Change 13.

EVIDENCE OF ROBERT PRESTON

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 My name is Robert Preston of Rhoborough Downs Station ("Rhoborough Downs"), which is located at the south end of Lake Pukaki.

1.2 I have farmed Rhoborough Downs for close to two decades now. At the very least it is a very demanding and challenging job, but I cannot imagine doing anything else.

1.3 Rhoborough Downs has been in the Preston family for about 90 years. It was purchased by my grandfather in 1919 and subsequently farmed by my father and now by myself and my wife, Sarah.

1.4 I would like to be able to provide the same opportunity to our 6 year old son Sam, so he can then do the same if he chooses to do so.

2. RHOBOROUGH DOWNS

2.1 Currently Rhoborough Downs is 12,500 acres, and before Tenure Review started it was 18,500 acres.

2.2 We run approximately 4000 merino sheep on the property as well as up to 100 cattle when the season allows for it. Due to significant rabbit infestation of our property over the last 100 years and stock limitations forced on us we have historically been unable to increase stock numbers.

2.3 Being a Crown Pastoral Lease Station has meant that we have been very restricted in our ability to diversify in any way. For this and many other reasons we entered into Tenure Review.

2.4 Essentially, we were forced into the Tenure Review process because of a wilding tree issue. When my father died, I tried to get the leasehold title

transferred into my name and for this to happen our landlord wanted me to sign an agreement to control the significant wilding tree problem on Rhoborough Downs. However, to sign the proposed agreement would have financially forced us off our land as we simply would not have the resources to control wilding pines. We have tried over the years to control this problem, but in the end we simply had to admit defeat as the task was too great.

- 2.5 We also went through the Tenure Review process in the hope of being able to free up some land near and around Lake Pukaki. If we are able to, we would sell it or develop it to provide income for a future for the property, as farming alone cannot do the job.
- 2.6 From these proceeds we would then be able to buy out family members who have a financial interest in the property. This would allow us to stay here, and to pass the property onto my family.
- 2.7 The Tenure Review process was supposed to be a five year process, which all the relevant departments promised to fast track. In the end it took us 12 years to complete. We had to surrender 6000 acres, in effect 40% of our high country property, back to the Crown.
- 2.8 As I understood it, the tenure process was supposed to identify those areas of significant inherent values on Rhoborough Downs and to return them to Crown ownership. Those parts of the property which were thought to be of lesser value to the public were to be freeholded so as to allow us the opportunity to make a living.
- 2.9 As part of the tenure review process, Rhoborough Downs was subject to a number of evaluations, with the preliminary proposal being notified for public submissions in 2002. Submissions were received from Forest & Bird, Environment Canterbury, Canterbury Aoraki Conservation Board and a number of recreational groups.
- 2.10 Landscape values were specifically mentioned in the Forest & Bird submission who asked that the "*back country*" of Rhoboro be put into public ownership because of its highly significant natural and landscape values. This is what happened.

- 2.11 The "Front Block" which was proposed to be freeholded was considered by Forest & Bird to have lost much of its natural cover, but had some areas which warranted further protection.
- 2.12 The upshot of it all was that the property was split 60/40 with 6000 acres, mostly in the back country, returned to the Crown. From my own personal point of view, I do not really disagree that the most striking landscapes were returned to the Crown, although I was never of the view that these landscape values had been in any way affected by its management for farming.
- 2.13 Not only did we have to surrender 40% of our property to the Crown we also had to pay the Crown a substantial amount of money on top of our debt to achieve freehold title.
- 2.14 Because the tenure review process took so long our debt snowballed and became huge. The whole process has been very stressful, horrible and to say the least one of the worst things all of us here at Rhoborough Downs have had to go through.
- 2.15 We were debt free when we started the tenure review process. At the completion of tenure review we were in debt to the tune of a substantial seven figure sum. We then subdivided our lake block which also cost us a lot of money and took a long time to process. Once the subdivision was approved the cost of advertising this land financially took a toll on our debt levels also. We managed to sell one block off and all this did was repay our debt.
- 2.16 Since achieving all of this we are now falling back into debt. The cost of running our property is way more than what we can generate, mainly because of poor wool returns, lamb prices and cattle returns, and the low prices on timber. We have ever increasing running costs i.e. fuel, fertilizer, freight etc. Unlike submitters such as the Department of Conservation and Environment Canterbury we do not get public funds to manage our property. We live in the real world!
- 2.17 As any farmer in the McKenzie or elsewhere for that matter will tell you, the reasons for poor returns are out of our control.
- 2.18 The end result is that Rhoboro Downs, no doubt like many a high country farm, is in a vulnerable financial position Our debt levels will continue to rise

with continual increases in running costs and low returns which gives us all here at Rhoborough Downs a lot of uncertainty.

2.19 On top of all this is the pressure to buy out family members, to not only take over this property completely but also to pass it onto my family.

2.20 For that reason, the property needs the means to be able to develop and diversify to stay financially viable in the future.

3. **PLAN CHANGE 13**

3.1 I think it must be remembered that we who live in the McKenzie Basin know it is place with some special qualities. For us we not only appreciate the Basin for these qualities, but we also have to work, live and survive in it.

3.2 We live in it in all seasons, every day, and do not want to see it spoilt by inappropriate development either.

3.3 The Basin has of course changed constantly over time in one way or another and will continue to do so whether we like it or not. Just look at the hydro scheme, for example, and the hydros across the basin, massive development that is now an accepted part of the Basin. If anything it adds interest to the whole area, as it tells a story in its own right. It does show that the Basin can take a lot of change without spoiling its qualities.

3.4 When I look at some of the provisions of the Plan Change and some of the assessments of what are thought adverse effects such as urban 4wds, urban dogs and lights at night, I just shake my head in disbelief at the silliness of it all. How could anyone who lives in the country possible think that a light at night is somehow foreign to the landscape. How could someone think that an area which has absorbed all of the electricity infrastructure not be able to absorb a few more lights at night?

3.5 For that matter, how could anyone driving down the state highways, constantly meeting other travellers and tourists feel a sense of isolation? Why is this sense of isolation thought of as a positive thing, when in reality the opposite is often the case for those living in the Basin?

3.6 Anyway, it seems to me that the only thing constant in life is change and we all need to be able to change with the times in all aspects financial, economic, and social for our survival.

- 3.7 Personally, my immediate reaction to Plan Change 13 was disbelief. That is, I really could not believe it that having just went through a hugely expensive bureaucratic hurdle in tenure review and before we had time to collect our thoughts about what we could do with Rhoborough and to properly plan for the future, another huge hurdle in the form of Plan Change 13 appeared.
- 3.8 Plan Change 13 has the potential to severely handicap us financially. For example, just the fact that 95% of our property has an X on it has devalued it by hundreds and thousands of dollars, if not millions. Did the Council think about this?
- 3.9 That these areas have been marked with an X because of their outstanding landscape values seems downright ridiculous when we have already been through a lengthy process where those values were supposed to have identified and returned to public ownership, as happened with the back country area of Rhoborough.
- 3.10 Not only that but we have the same submitters involved with the tenure review process coming back again for another opportunity to stop us doing anything on our property.
- 3.11 I ask myself how could the landscape values of the freehold part of Rhoborough have become so important over the last 6 years since those submissions? I haven't noticed any change, except more wilding pines.
- 3.12 What grates even more is that all this has happened without any proper consultation whatsoever, or for that matter without a decent landscape report. To be honest, I think the landowners in McKenzie deserve better treatment than what we have received. At the very least we deserved the courtesy of a proper site visit and a decent opportunity to discuss all those issues faced by high country farmers.
- 3.13 Another real surprise about Plan Change 13 is that, to the best of my knowledge, there has been very little community concern expressed at development in the McKenzie Basin over the last couple of years. Has anyone from the tourist industry said that we have to stop all development in the McKenzie Basin or people won't go to Mt Cook any more? I don't think so.

4. OPTIONS FOR RHOBOROUGH DOWNS

- 4.1 There are a number of options available to us looking ahead to the future.
- 4.2 One option is to convert to dairying, although personally I am not a great fan of the idea.
- 4.3 Conversion also depends on a number of factors, including whether or not we can get consent to take groundwater. Again, this is far from a certainty, as recent battles over the right to water in the McKenzie have shown.
- 4.4 Conversion also has a very high capital cost, which of course means that if I were to go into dairying, I would be starting off with a huge debt once again.
- 4.5 It also seems to me that one effect of Plan Change 13 is that if I wanted to convert, I would need to obtain consent for farm workers accommodation and possibly the dairy sheds. As I understand it, any such consent may easily be publicly notified, could take up to 2-3 years to go through the process and I would face the possibility of getting nothing at the end.
- 4.6 Personally I favour the alternative, more sustainable option of tourism related activities.
- 4.7 Apparently, there are up to 1 million tourists that go past our place every year. My question is how does Plan Change 13 enable us to take advantage of these tourists to secure our economic future? Graham Densem's idea that we might be allowed to hire canoes from our woolshed to tourists is hardly going to save our bacon.
- 4.8 I have several ideas for Rhoborough Downs which could help to secure our economic survival which would also help the local economy without turning the basin into a "Queenstown". All these ideas are now in jeopardy because of Plan Change 13.
- 4.9 Through knowing every inch of our property, in which Mr Densem has only stood on less than 1%, I think we at Rhoborough Downs would know where it is most suitable for development to occur.
- 4.10 The impact of such things could not only be hidden if that was necessary but also blend into the landscape with less than minimum effect.

Lake Wardell

- 4.11 Our Lake Wardell block, for example, is perfectly located for tourism. It is a piece of land located between the Lake Pukaki Canal and the junction of State Highways 8 and 80. It is 61ha in size and is currently covered in many tree species, some planted and some natural.
- 4.12 This land was used to support most of the Pukaki Village before the village was taken down to allow for the raising of Lake Pukaki. This was done on the condition that after the hydro scheme was completed the Twizel township would be bulldozed down and the Pukaki Village reinstated. This did not happen and through the Public Works Act 1956 our Lake Wardell block was taken from my father. It took him 15 years of court battles to get it back! It was given back unfenced and without stock water so has been of no use to us for farming purposes ever since.
- 4.13 It was another huge factor for us around Tenure Review to go through the process to free up Lake Wardell. This was to enable us, at the very least, to be able to set up some type of tourism related venture which would provide Rhoborough Downs with an alternative supplementary source of income to secure our future. Having this piece of land come back to us after going through Tenure Review with an X on it is just totally unacceptable.
- 4.14 This piece of land could easily accommodate many things, invisible from all public roads and viewing areas, unlike the Lake Pukaki airport revamp and the new Lake Pukaki village site.

Loch Logan

- 4.15 There are numerous other areas within the boundaries of Rhoborough Downs which could accommodate many types of developments without impacting on your so called outstanding landscapes. To have areas shaded pink on your maps without viewing them or knowing these areas is flawed.
- 4.16 A further area of Rhoborough Downs that is perfectly located for tourism is an area off State Highway 80. It was used as a gravel pit to create the new State Highway 80, from State Highway 8 to Mt Cook, after the last raising of Lake Pukaki.
- 4.17 My late father Logan Preston diverted a creek into it after the Highway was completed and created Loch Logan.

- 4.18 It has been stocked with Trout and its surrounding land would lend itself to a hunting and fishing lodge and could also easily accommodate a camping ground with log cabins or small huts. There could be such things as mountain bike trails and walkways amongst the trees, for example which would provide a wonderful experience for visitors.
- 4.19 The area around Loch Logan is such a huge area that all of the above could be capable of not only being invisible from any public viewing area or roads but also would be more than capable of being totally screened into the environment and landscape.
- 4.20 We suggest that this area could accommodate several nodes, without adversely impacting the natural landscape of the McKenzie Basin. If you ask me, you could easily place another Twizel within this area and no-one would ever be able to tell.

Sharing Nodes

- 4.21 The idea that if you share a node with a neighboring property and if they use it first you get none is far from fair and just.
- 4.22 The idea regarding having nodes 2 km away from each other is also flawed when in some areas it could be possible to have 10 nodes all next door to each other and all invisible to passersby and neighboring nodes.

Conclusion

- 4.23 The high country farmers and their families are the very backbone of the McKenzie Country.
- 4.24 We were here before the towns, before the cities and survival in this harsh country is what we understand best and we all know what we need to do to survive into the future.
- 4.25 One of the priorities of the Mackenzie District Council must be to look after the farming community.
- 4.26 Options for diversification should not be prevented by unrealistic rules which seem to make it as difficult as possible to do any development. The cost of

obtaining consents can be significant and the greatest deterrent is the uncertainty of outcome and even getting finance in the first place. Banks will not lend money to something which has so much uncertainty to it. Banks are very conservative in my experience.

4.27 We at Rhoborough Downs are very disappointed at the lack of consultation around Plan Change 13. There is a lack of proper landscape analysis as well as social and economic studies.

4.28 I would like the Council to tell me how Plan Change 13 allows me to provide for my family into the future when we can not do it by farming alone.

4.29 What if Plan Change 13 is so negative that we cannot develop and we are to be forced off the land?

4.30 Is this the outcome the RMA is seeking.?

Thank you

R Preston
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