

Draft Communications plan – Opening the Waituna Lagoon

Te Rūnanga o Awarua, Environment Southland and Director General – Department of Conservation

Purpose

The purpose of this communications plan is to outline the approach to inform the Waituna community and stakeholders about openings of the Waituna Lagoon, as per the consent conditions.

Background

Waituna Lagoon (Waipārera) is part of the Awarua Wetlands complex and recognised under the Ramsar convention as a wetland of international importance. It is also a site of cultural significance to Ngāi Tahu, as recognised by a statutory acknowledgement under the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998.

The lagoon has been manually opened to the sea since the early 1900s to allow for fish passage and drainage of surrounding farmland.

The previous resource consent expired in 2022. It was largely focused on drainage and set out the conditions under which the opening could happen.

Environment Southland, Te Rūnanga o Awarua and the Director-General of Conservation are co-applicants for a new consent regime that has its focus on supporting the lagoon's long-term ecological and cultural values. The consent application sets out an on-going management approach.

Communications objectives

- Communicate actively with the Waituna landowners, stakeholders and other key audiences about decisions to open the lagoon
- Regularly provide updates on the health of the lagoon and catchment
- Where appropriate, provide opportunities for engagement ahead of decisions that impact the lagoon
- Ensure audiences are aware of the science and other information that impact decisions to open the lagoon
- Build and maintain credibility with the Waituna community and stakeholders through regular communication activities.

Approach

Communicate clearly, honestly and with empathy at all times.

Establish a regular approach to communicating information and decision making around openings.

Communicate when an opening is being considered, and when the decision is made.

Establish formal signoff process for communications outputs.

Communications issued about lagoon management issued under logos of the three partner agencies.

Key messages

- Environment Southland, Te Rūnanga o Awarua and the Director-General of Conservation are the three co-applicants for a new opening consent for Waituna Lagoon.
- The previous consent was held by the Lake Waituna Control Association and expired in 2022.
- The joint consent application includes a suite of conditions to support the lagoon's ecological and cultural health.
- Awarua Rūnanga should be enabled and supported to exercise kaitiakitanga and rangatiratanga over Waipārera and be actively involved in the restoration and enhancement of Waipārera.
- Environment Southland continuously monitors water levels and water quality in the Waituna Lagoon and catchment.
- The Department of Conservation manages the Waituna Lagoon scientific reserve (including walking tracks) and undertakes regular predator control and monitoring of key species and other work in the reserve.
- Heavy machinery is needed to physically open the lagoon, and public safety is paramount. This may require temporary partial closures of the reserve when this work happens.
- Waituna Lagoon is part of the Awarua-Waituna wetland complex and was among the first sites in the world to be named "a wetland of international significance" under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 1976.
- It is home to many species of native birds, plants, fish and insects, and is a culturally important site for Ngāi Tahu. The lagoon is also a significant trout fishery and a popular walking area.

Audiences

Internal

- Councillors and leadership teams of applicants
- Relevant staff of applicant organisations
- Te Rūnanga o Ngai Tahu

External

- Whakamana te Waituna trustees
- Waituna Catchment Liaison committee
- Waituna community
- Wider Southland community and all those with interest in the area

Stakeholders

- Southland District Council
- Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society – Otago/ Southland Branch
- Southland Fish and Game Council
- National Wetland Trust
- Te Wai Parera Trust
- Southland Conservation Board
- Waituna Recreational Users Group
- Southland Recreational Whitebaiters Association

- Federated Farmers – Southland Branch
- Rural Support Trust
- Fonterra
- Open Country
- DairyNZ
- Beef + Lamb NZ
- MPI – On-farm support team

Action Plan

What	When	Where	Who
Environment Southland's Waituna e-newsletter	6-monthly or as required	To email inboxes of subscribers	Subscribers (mix of community members, media, stakeholders)
Waituna website	Updated as needed	*TBC*	Managed by Environment Southland communications team
Liaison with Waituna Catchment Group	Quarterly	Phone, Email, Face-to-face	Assign relationship manager/key contact
Media releases	As needed, but particularly around opening decisions	Email	Issued by co-applicants communications teams.
Facebook	As needed	*TBC* Community Facebook pages (eg. Waituna for all)	Environment Southland communications team DOC communications team
Stakeholder email	As needed, but particularly around opening decisions	Email	List to be created
Community meetings	As required	In catchment	Partners/governance group