

**BEFORE INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONERS APPOINTED BY THE SOUTHLAND REGIONAL COUNCIL**

**IN THE MATTER** of the Resource Management Act 1991

**AND IN THE MATTER** of various resource consent applications for periodic openings of Waituna Lagoon Waipārera by Te Rūnanga o Awarua, the Department of Conservation and the Southland Regional Council (Environment Southland) [the Applicants]

**Application No.** **APP-20242456**

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**Evidence of James Jonathan Airey (Recreation Values)**  
**on behalf of the Applicants**  
**Dated: 10 July 2025**

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**Department of Conservation | *Te Papa Atawhai***

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**Introduction**

1. My full name is James Jonathan Airey.
2. I have been asked by the Applicants to provide evidence on their application for resource consents to provide for periodic openings of Waituna Lagoon Waipārera to the sea.

**Qualifications and experience**

3. I am currently employed by the Department of Conservation (DOC). I am the Supervisor of the Murihiku District Heritage and Visitor Team and am based in Invercargill, Southland. I have worked for the Department of Conservation since February 2023.
4. Prior to my role with the Department of Conservation I was a member of the New Zealand Police. I joined Police in 2006 and over my career held numerous positions including Sergeant, Armed Offenders Squad Team Leader and Dog Handler. I left Police in 2022 to join the Department of Conservation.

**Scope**

5. I have been asked to provide evidence in relation to the recreation values of the Waituna Lagoon Waipārera.
6. My evidence addresses the following matters:
  - a. The make-up of the Murihiku Heritage and Visitor Team.
  - b. The areas of responsibility of the Murihiku Heritage and Visitor Team.
  - c. The visitor assets at the Waituna Lagoon.
  - d. Historical Visitor Records regarding the Waituna Lagoon walking tracks and other walking tracks in the region.
  - e. The observations of the Murihiku Heritage and Visitor Team regarding visitor use of the assets at the Waituna Lagoon.

**Material Considered**

7. In preparing my evidence I have relied upon:
  - a. The asset records kept by the Department of Conservation.
  - b. The historic visitor records kept by the Department of Conservation in relation to the Waituna Lagoon walking tracks.

- c. The observations I have made on regular maintenance work carried out on DOC's visitor assets at Waituna Lagoon.
- d. The observations of my team on regular maintenance work carried out on our visitor assets at Waituna Lagoon.

### **The make-up and responsibilities of the Murihiku Heritage and Visitor Team**

- 8. The purpose of the Murihiku Heritage and Visitor Team is to enrich lives through connection to our nature and to protect and tell the stories of our historic sites
- 9. Our functions are historic site maintenance, walking track maintenance, visitor site maintenance, volunteer project facilitators, local site experts and ambassadors for DOC.
- 10. I am the Supervisor of the Murihiku Heritage and Visitor Team. There are seven Rangers on this Team and each Ranger performs a different role.
  - a. The Supervisor is responsible for the team and operational delivery of work.
  - b. The Senior Ranger is responsible for work and financial planning and sets the team's monthly operational priorities.
  - c. The Owaka Site Lead has oversight of the day to day Heritage and Visitor operations within the Catlins and works closely with the Supervisor.
  - d. The Owaka C Band Ranger performs a dual role. They have oversight of and lead the day to day Biodiversity operations within the Catlins. They also carry out Heritage and Visitor tasks when required.
  - e. The Murihiku C Band Ranger is responsible for administration and logistical tasks and ensures that the team has all the equipment required for a task or operation.
  - f. Two B Band Rangers are responsible for carrying out the day to day Heritage and Visitor operational tasks throughout our District.
- 11. The team covers a vast geographical area including much of Southland, the Catlins, offshore islands and the Subantarctic Islands. We are responsible for the care and maintenance of many historically significant sites throughout our region. We are also responsible for a vast visitor walking track network, numerous campsites, bridges and back country huts.
- 12. Throughout Southland and the Catlins, the team maintains four campgrounds, 28 back country huts and approximately 34 walking tracks of various lengths and difficulty.
- 13. The Waituna Lagoon is one of our responsibilities. The Awarua–Waituna wetland area has high biodiversity value due to the fact it is one of New Zealand's largest remaining coastal

wetland systems, encompassing a mix of coastal lagoons, freshwater swamps, extensive peatlands and estuaries. Awarua–Waituna provides habitats for an outstanding variety of rare flora and fauna including plants which usually only grow in subalpine conditions. It has been internationally recognised for its ecological values. In 1976 it was designated New Zealand’s first Ramsar site.

14. Awarua–Waituna is important to Ngāi Tahu due to their long occupation of the area and their relationship with the taonga species that are found there. Nohoanga (settlements) were situated around Waituna Lagoon and Māori traditionally used the fertile wetlands as a source of food, especially kai moana from the lagoon. The area’s significance to Ngāi Tahu was recognised by a Statutory Acknowledgement under the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998.

#### **The visitor assets at the Waituna Lagoon**

15. The DOC assets at the Lagoon which my team is responsible for include:
  - a. A picnic area and toilet near the main car park,
  - b. A boardwalk that leads to a covered viewing platform with interpretation panels,
  - c. A 4.5 kilometre loop track.

The number of assets at the Waituna Lagoon is standard. Many of our sites have toilet facilities, picnic areas and multiple route options that cater to people of mixed physical abilities.

16. We follow an annual maintenance schedule. The frequency with which we visit each DOC site is determined by a number of factors. These include visitor numbers, seasonal demands such as plant growth and damage caused by weather events. We visit Waituna on a monthly basis. We check that the boardwalk and track are safe for visitors to use. We cut back vegetation, check for dangerous trees and ensure the track surface is clear of debris. We maintain the picnic area and ensure the toilet meets DOC’s hygiene standards.

#### **The observations of the Murihiku Heritage and Visitor Team regarding visitor use of the assets at the Waituna Lagoon**

17. The lagoon is in a rural location with access via an unsealed road. It does not see many visitors. From DOC staff observations when carrying out maintenance at Waituna, we believe that the majority of visitors use the boardwalk to the lookout but bypass the loop track.

18. A range of rare birds can be found around Awarua-Waituna including the Southern New Zealand Dotterel, Godwits and Australasian Bitterns. The wetland also attracts a wide range of trans-equatorial migrating and wading birds. As a result, Waituna is a popular destination with birdwatchers.

#### **Historical Records of Visitors to the Waituna Lagoon Walking Track**

19. DOC stopped recording visitor numbers on this track in May 2021. DOC does not currently have an active system that records visitor numbers to this track.
20. To provide an idea of the visitor numbers we typically see at our local tracks I have compared the Waituna Lagoon Track visitor numbers with those of two other local tracks we maintain. The Glory Track in Bluff is one of our more popular local tracks while the Whisky Gully Track is a more remote track in the Blue Mountains (near Tapanui) that is also considered a relatively low use track.
21. Historical records show that between May 2019 and April 2020, 434 people used the Waituna Lagoon Loop Track. Comparatively over the same time period, the Glory Track in Bluff had 8,919 users and the Whisky Gully track in the Blue Mountains had 2,392 users.
22. Between May 2020 and May 2021, 569 people used the Waituna Loop Track. Comparatively over the same time period, the Glory Track in Bluff had 9,141 users, and the Whisky Gully Track in the Blue Mountains had 1,179 users.
23. These numbers include DOC staff.
24. The historic numbers show that on average only 1-2 people use the tracks at the Waituna Lagoon on a daily basis. This is consistent with the visitor numbers the team observes during routine maintenance at Waituna currently. It is very rare for DOC staff to come across visitors using the tracks at Waituna.
25. Based on our team's observations and maintenance schedule, the DOC tracks at Waituna Lagoon have low levels of visitor use. This may be because of the remoteness of the Lagoon and that the access to the Lagoon is off gravel roads.

26. Outside a core group of users, the low use and popularity of Waituna as a visitor destination has led DOC to prioritise maintenance at other locations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JA' with a stylized flourish.

James Jonathan Airey

Dated 10 July 2025