

Before the Independent Hearing Panel

In the Matter of the Resource Management Act 1991 (**RMA**)

And

In the Matter of an application to the Gore District Council and Environment Southland for resource consents to establish and operate a gold mining activity near 972 Waikaka Road, Chatton North, Southland

Reference APP-20242608 (Environment Southland)
LU 24035 (Gore District Council)

Evidence of Benjamin Espie on behalf Waikaka Gold Mines Limited

Landscape

Dated 18 November 2025

Introduction

1. My name is Benjamin Espie. I reside in Queenstown. I hold the qualifications of Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (with honours) from Lincoln University and Bachelor of Arts from Canterbury University. I am a member of the Southern Branch of the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects and was the Chairman of that branch between 2007 and 2016. Since November 2004 I have been a director of Vivian and Espie Limited, a specialist resource management and landscape planning consultancy based in Queenstown. Between March 2001 and November 2004, I was employed as Principal of Landscape Architecture by Civic Corporation Limited, a resource management consultancy company contracted to the Queenstown Lakes District Council.
2. The majority of my work involves advising clients regarding the management of landscapes and amenity that the Resource Management Act 1991 (the Act) provides and regarding the landscape related provisions of various district and regional plans. I also produce assessment reports and evidence in relation to proposed development or proposed plan provisions. The primary objective of these assessments and evidence is to ascertain effects in relation to landscape values and visual amenity.
3. Much of my experience has involved providing landscape and visual amenity assessments of resource consent applications and plan changes in the rural landscapes of the South Island. Over the last 25 years I have prepared numerous assessment reports and briefs of evidence regarding the landscape and amenity related effects of many forms of development and land use including numerous assessments of mining and gravel extraction operations in the rural areas of a number of districts.

Code of Conduct

4. I confirm that I have read the Code of Conduct for Expert Witnesses contained in the Environment Court Practice Note 2023 and confirm that I

have complied with it in preparing this evidence. I confirm that the issues addressed in this evidence are within my area of expertise, except where I have indicated that I am relying on others' opinions. I have not omitted material facts known to me that might alter or detract from my evidence.

Summary of Opinion

5. Vivian+Espie prepared a Landscape and Visual Effects Assessment Report, dated the 24th of June 2024 (**the v+e report**), that was submitted with the application. In response to a Request for Further Information from Gore District Council, additional landscape assessment commentary was provided in a Memo Regarding Landscape Issues dated the 25th of February 2025 (**the v+e memo**). The v+e report was primarily prepared by Jessica McKenzie with supervision and oversight by myself. I adopt the v+e report as my opinion for the purpose of this evidence. The v+e memo was primarily prepared by myself.
6. The methodology for the assessment set out in the v+e report and memo was guided by the Te Tangi A Te Manu, Aotearoa New Zealand Landscape Assessment Guidelines (TTatM)¹. The effects of the proposed activity were assessed in relation to views and visual amenity and in relation to landscape character and values. The identified effects were then also considered in relation to the outcomes that are sought by the relevant statutory documents. I have visited the site and the surrounding landscape a number of times.
7. For convenience, I summarise the conclusions of the v+e report as follows:

¹ Te Tangi a te Manu: Aotearoa New Zealand Landscape Assessment Guidelines'. Tuia Pita Ora New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects, July 2022 (**TTatM**).

- i.* The proposal seeks to introduce a mining activity to a site which is currently open rural landscape, but which has historical association with gold mining.
- ii.* Views of the proposed operation will be available to varying degrees from Waikaka Road, North Chatton Road, Nicholson Road, Turnbull Road, and an unformed legal road to the north of the site. Visibility will also be available from public areas along the Waikaka Stream and from nearby private properties. Taking into account the staging of the proposal, sequential rehabilitation and mitigation, adverse effects on views and visual amenities will be of a low-moderate degree at most.
- iii.* The landscape character will be altered by the introduction of human modifications that detract from its ruralness, naturalness, and openness, adversely affecting the landscape's character. Overall, I consider that the proposal will bring about a noticeable change that reflects the significance of goldmining in the area. The adverse effects on landscape character and values will be of a moderate-low degree, while mining is operational. Ultimately, all effects will be remedied.
- iv.* I consider that the proposal sits well with the guidance given in the relevant objectives and policies of the Gore District Plan²; that primary production activities are part of rural landscapes, but also that amenity values and the quality of the environment will be maintained.

Peer Review and Further Information

- 8. On behalf of Gore District Council, Mr Mike Moore prepared a peer review of the v+e report, dated the 29th of October 2024. The peer review concluded that:

² Paragraphs 12 and 13 of the v+e report set out the guidance that has been taken from the Gore District Plan; most relevantly Operative Objectives 3.3(1) and 3.3(2). Ms Collie's evidence gives comprehensive discussion of the relevant objectives and policies.

“In my review, the VE assessment methodology is consistent with current best practice (as per Te Tangi a te Manu). In general, I consider that its analysis is well-reasoned, and its conclusions are credible. I consider, however, that there are a few omissions and recommend that further information is requested on:

- i. The effects of the activity on the natural character of the streams.*
- ii. The visual amenity effects of the activity at 440 Turnbull Road.*
- iii. Mitigation and restoration plantings and the heights and locations of life-of-mine grassed bunds”.*

9. Further information on these points was provided by the applicant in response to a Request for Further Information. The v+e memo was part of that response. Mr Moore then gave further responses in a memo dated 19 August 2025. To briefly summarise in relation to the issues on which further information was given:

- i. Additional information has been provided by Ross Dungey regarding aquatic and riparian ecology. When reinstated, the sinuosity of Waikaka Stream and Shepherds Creek will be maintained and I understand (pursuant to Mr Dungey’s evidence) that native riparian ecology will be considerably improved, as was suggested by Mr Moore’s August memo. Pools and riffles will be recreated in both watercourses and will be enhanced where possible to improve habitat. Undercut banks will develop over time, further recreating habitat. Shrub willow (avoiding crack willow) will also be planted. Overall, the reinstated situation will recreate the natural character that currently exists and will improve it, in accordance with Mr Moore’s suggestions by increasing vegetation, including native riparian ecology.
- ii. 440 Turnbull Road (the Stevenson property) is a 52ha farming property to the southeast of the subject site, the owners of which submitted in relation to the application (although, have subsequently given written approval, meaning the issue is no longer of relevance).

The property's dwelling is close to Turnbull Road, with considerable mature tree planting surrounding it. Views from the dwelling and garden area are available in a north-westerly direction to the proposed mining area. The closest part of the operation (the Year 8 stage) is approximately 950 metres from the dwelling. Views from the dwelling will change in that they will include (depending upon the stage of the operations) stockpiles, a disturbed area, haul roads, an infrastructure area, vehicle movements and processing activities. These activities will occupy one part of the broader pastoral panorama. Overall, the proposed operation is likely to detract from the amenity provided by the current (mostly) pastoral landscape scene. We consider the adverse effect on views and visual amenity is best described as being of a low degree while the mining is in operation (and therefore temporary).

- iii. A band of flax and toe toe is proposed adjacent to Waikaka Road. Flax and toe toe have a rapid growth rate and are expected to reach a height of 2 metres within 5 years. The proposed planting will tie in with roadside vegetation with the surrounding rural landscape and provide screening once established. Bunding is proposed around the perimeter of the infrastructure area to a height of 2m, with the outside faces formed naturalistically and re-grassed. As Mr Moore suggests, "naturalistic form" will require moderate grades, shaped to blend with surrounding land. Similar bunding will be placed around the stockpile SP1 and the Starter Pit and will remain in place throughout the project. Temporary perimeter bunds (again re-grassed and of naturalistic form) will also be created in relation to each stage of the operation. In combination, the proposed bunds will provide useful (but not complete) visual screening of mining activities, thereby mitigating potential effects on visual amenity. The applicant agrees with Ms Skuse's recommended consent conditions regarding bunding, most relevantly condition 18.

- 10. Subsequent to point (iii) above, I understand that the applicant now notes that a line of flax / toe toe vegetation within the site adjacent to Waikaka Road may interfere with drainage management within the site. I have been

asked to consider the options of locating this planting within the road reserve (but immediately adjacent to the site), or excluding this planting.

11. The planting would have the same effect whether inside the site or within the adjacent road reserve. The northeastern side of Waikaka Road has a particularly wide grass verge (10 to 12 metres). Planting could easily be accommodated immediately outside the site, while retaining a sizable grass verge. I note that flax and toe toe are common and vigorous in this part of the district and beyond initial planting will require practically no maintenance.
12. Paragraphs 30 to 34 of the v+e report discuss the visual effects of the proposal as experienced from Waikaka Road. The road undulates in level, such that visibility across the site is somewhat intermittent. If the roadside planting was done, it would take time to establish, despite being of a rapid growth rate. During the first year of operations, there would be relatively plain visibility of mining work in any event. The planting would start to have a useful screening or filtering effect after perhaps 3 years, and would continue to increase. As years pass, the operation moves further from Waikaka Road, with bunding associated with each stage, and with the infrastructure area, providing screening. With or without the roadside planting, a Waikaka Road user will certainly be visually aware of the operation.
13. If we consider a situation in which there is no planting along the Waikaka Road boundary, I consider that the mining activity will be more visually prominent than if this planting was included. As mentioned, the planting would only start to be useful after perhaps year 3, so it is the more distant views to later stages of the operation that would be less mitigated in this sense. The v+e report took account of the proposed roadside planting and found (at paragraph 34) that adverse visual amenity effects in relation to Waikaka Road users would be of a low-moderate degree, reducing to a low degree over time. In the absence of roadside planting, I consider that this would continue to be the case but the timeframe over which the degree of effect reduces would be longer. Effects in relation to this stretch of road

would not reduce to being of a low degree until approximately year 5. As discussed, ultimately these effects will be remedied.

The Section 42A report

14. Ms Skuse's Section 42A report (**the s42A report**) comments on landscape and visual amenity issues in paragraphs 85 to 119. The s42A report takes account of the v+e report, Mr Moore's peer review report and his memo of 19 August 2025. On visual effects, the s42A report concludes³:

Taking into account the expert assessments, I acknowledge that the degree of adverse effects on views and visual amenity is reduced by the recognised values associated with mining in the area and the transient nature of road users. The moving nature of the operation will reduce effects in terms of the extent of land disturbed at one time, however the existence of the mine will be apparent throughout the duration of consent. I consider the adverse effects in relation to visual amenity from public viewpoints (mainly nearby roads) will be minor, but once the site is rehabilitated (noting the consent has a duration), the visual effects will be negligible.

15. In relation to landscape character (including natural character), the s42A report echoes Mr Moore's suggestion of taking the opportunity for long-term natural character and biodiversity enhancement through native riparian planting. I understand that this is adopted by the applicant, as is discussed in the evidence of Mr Dungey. I agree that this additional native riparian planting will have positive effects in relation to landscape character and values when compared to the existing situation.

³ Section 42A Report, Joanne Skuse, 12 November 2025, paragraph 94.

16. On these issues, the s42A report ultimately concludes⁴:

Overall, I consider the adverse effects on visual amenity and landscape character will be spatially confined and appropriately mitigated. The proposal incorporates progressive rehabilitation and bunding to reduce visual effects from public viewpoints.

17. Notwithstanding the above, the s42A report recommends various consent conditions relating to landscape issues. Recommended conditions 27 and 28 require a Rehabilitation Management Plan involving native riparian ecological restoration. I understand that the applicant is happy to adopt those conditions. Recommended conditions 19 to 23 relate to details of roadside flax / toe toe planting. As discussed previously, I understand that there are some issues with locating that planting within the site. If that planting is to proceed within the road reserve, I consider that recommended conditions 19, and 21 to 23 are appropriate⁵. In relation to condition 19, I suggest that plants should be a minimum grade of 2.5 litre pot size, with a minimum spacing of 1.5m between plants. Plants should not be trimmed after planting, thereby reaching a natural height of 2 to 3m.

Submissions

18. Since the time of notification, additional written approvals have been gained in relation to the proposal. Consequently, no opposing submissions remain in relation to landscape or visual amenity.

⁴ Ibid, paragraph 114.

⁵ I note that recommended condition 20 as per the s42A Report refers to boundary planting being located within the property boundary, which is no longer proposed.

Conclusion

19. Since the time of notification, further information has been provided by the applicant in response to Mr Moore's peer review report and memo. I confirm my agreement with the findings of the v+e report, that there will be some temporary adverse landscape and visual effects (of up to a low-moderate degree) while the mining project is operational, and these will ultimately be remedied. I consider that the proposal sits well with the guidance given by the relevant landscape-related objectives and policies.
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Ben Espie

Dated 19 November 2025