

Deals are being done down south, reports SUE MATURIN, that are adding extensive areas of tussock grasslands to New Zealand's conservation heritage.

FOR YEARS FOREST and Bird, Federated Mountain Clubs and the Fish and Game Council have been pressing for the protection of tussock grasslands in the South Island high country.

Most of these grasslands are in Crown pastoral leases, and there has been strong resistance from farmers to their protection. Until recently almost no gains had been made and every year the area under tussock has been shrinking as introduced green grasses replace the landscapes of tall tawny tussocks.

Now, in Otago at least, there is a quiet revolution taking place as the process called "tenure change" gathers momentum. The Otago conservancy of the Department of Conservation has put the issue high on its agenda and this has provided the momentum needed to break the impasse.

Tenure change can be a situation where all parties make gains. Conservation wins through the transfer to DoC of pastoral lease lands with high natural and recreation values, and farmers also win by gaining freehold title to lease lands which have predominantly production values.

Some lessees are keen to gain freehold title so that they can begin to diversify away from grazing. Grape growing, lifestyle blocks, tourism development and plantation forestry are becoming increasingly attractive but are not permitted under current pastoral lease tenure.

ONE OF THE FIRST leases with a major conservation interest to go through the tenure change hoops in Otago was Closeburn station set around a trio of lakes in the midst of Wakatipu's craggy mountains near Queenstown.

In a deal announced just before the end of 1992, a Queenstown developer looked set to gain freehold title to much of the scenic backdrops of these lakes in return for DoC taking over some impor-

tant wetlands and high-altitude land adjacent to an existing scenic reserve.

This initial deal sent alarm bells ringing through Forest and Bird and the Wakatipu conservation community who saw the agreement as unfair to conservation and recreation interests. A local campaign pushed DoC, Landcorp and the lessee back to the negotiating table.

The new arrangement that has emerged sees about 2,000 hectares of scenic backdrop to the lakes transferred to DoC rather than being freeholded. This successful outcome is also due to the open-mindedness of the developer, David Broomfield, who realised that his plans

although they are not without problems. In some cases we think DoC is being too generous with offers of perpetual grazing rights on lands which should be retired from grazing. It is much easier to get protection for high-altitude relatively unproductive lands than it is for lower-altitude lands which have important conservation values but are still valuable for grazing. Unless we keep a watchful eye on the process there is a danger that some important areas that should be conserved will be lost from the Crown's estate.

At present the tenure change process results in a two-way split between freeholding and the conservation estate. This means that lands with a mix of conservation and production values are ending up as special leases in the DoC estate or are being freeholded with covenants. Neither option is desirable or appropriate for many pastoral leases. DoC should not become a sizeable grazing manager, and covenants do not necessarily give secure long-term protection.

The 1948 Land Act needs urgent amendment to provide a better procedure for freeholding and protection for land that has high conservation and recreation status. Tenure changes so far suggest that the tenure split should be a three-way one so that lands with mixed conservation and production values remain in the Crown estate but are administered by a government body other than DoC.

The Land Act makes no provision for conservation or even sustainability and yet the lands under its jurisdiction are some of the most fragile and important natural areas in New Zealand and are easily degraded through exploitation. Large areas have enormous values for conservation and recreation.

A Land Bill has been on the agenda of successive governments for almost a decade but, like his predecessors, the previous Lands Minister Rob Storey put it in the too-hard basket. The new political climate and the urgency for change may hopefully break this stalemate. ♦



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HIGH COUNTRY

HEADWAY



The west arm of Moke Lake on Closeburn station looking onto the face of Mt Hanley. Under the original tenure change deal this steep forested area was to be freeholded with a "management agreement". A campaign by Forest and Bird and the Wakatipu Environmental Society led to the land - close to 2,000 hectares - being protected as part of the DoC estate.

would not be jeopardised by giving up the lands with high conservation values. In the end he was willing to sacrifice the loss of some grazing in order to allow conservation to benefit.

The tenure change process has become progressively more open. The Closeburn outcome paved the way for improved public consultation in the process, and proposals are now more thoroughly discussed with all interested parties so that backroom deals are not made before public input is sought.

Through the process some 2,400 hectares of former pastoral lease land has already been transferred to DoC, and another 12,000 hectares are in the pipeline. At least 50 other runholders in Otago have registered an interest in tenure changes.

Forest and Bird welcomes these ad-