

Board criticised over snow farm work

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By Dave Smith

Wanaka: Waiorau Snow Farm operators John and Mary Lee and the Otago Conservation Board came under attack yesterday from a former board member.

The board was meeting on top of the Pisa Range in the Lees' Waiorau Snow Farm base building.

Speaking during the public forum held as part of the meeting, Dr Mike Floate apologised to the Lees then launched into a verbal attack on the "severe maltreatment of the landscape".

He acknowledged the Lees' work in terms of economic benefit from the snow farm's winter operations as an international testing ground but asked the board whether the extensive earthworks were legal under land tenure ownership and during the tenure review.

Dr Floate understood the tenure review process was not a "done deal".

John Lee replied that he and the commissioner of crown lands had both signed the review and it was waiting for title.

Dr Floate said he raised the earthworks issue in 1998 as a board member and the area was supposed to be protected for its landscape values.

"What can be done to ensure, in any other tenure review deals, a similar flagrant violation does not occur?" Dr Floate asked.

Otago conservator Jeff Connell said the Department of Conservation was in the role of spectator during a re-negotiated agreement.

Board member Alan Mark admitted it was his first visit to the area and was "quite amazed" that the activity was permitted at that elevation in Central Otago.

While the snow farm brought enjoyment (to skiers) and economic benefits, Mr Mark said winter resorts should not be viewed in the summer.

However, fellow member John Beattie believed the ski trails and facilities made maximum use of a small confined area.

Mr Lee said the major impact was contained in a 40ha area.

Board chairman Les Cleveland said the board should refrain from further comment until members had toured the snow farm today with the Lees and talked through some of the issues.