

Future of South Westland's forests decided

On February 27 the Deputy Prime Minister, Geoffrey Palmer, announced that all 311,000 hectares of former State forest in South Westland, south of the Cook River, would be protected.

This decision, allocating the area to the Department of Conservation, means that Government will now submit a nomination to UNESCO for a South West New Zealand World Heritage area.

"If the nomination is accepted, this will put the region on the international tourist map along with other World Heritage sites such as Yellowstone National Park, the Grand Canyon, the Taj Mahal and the Pyramids," said Mr Palmer.

Government has also decided to allocate a total of \$1.5 million, over the next three years, for recreational and tourist facilities in the area including:

- the development of the concept of the West Coast main highway as a scenic, natural, historic and cultural heritage parkway;
- the development and upgrading of roadside facilities for safe viewing, interpretation and picnicking at Knight's Point, Lake Paringa, Jackson Bay, Pleasant Point, Bruce Bay, Lake Moeraki and Ship Creek;
- the building of a visitor centre at Haast near the Haast Highway/Jackson Bay Road junction;
- the mounting of new displays at the Fox Glacier and Makarora visitor centres to provide information for visitors entering South Westland from both the northern and southern entrances to the region;
- the construction of a swamp boardwalk in the Haast area through kahikatea forest and wetland;
- the establishment of high-standard wetland and forest walks beside the main highway and Jackson Bay road to provide easy access for family groups and tourists to a cross-section of the natural and historic features of the area, including through the Kini wetland, from Lake Moeraki to the sea, to Cole Creek beach, to Mataketake lagoon and through Moccasin gap to the beach;
- upgrading and interpretation of

existing tracks including Lake Mary and Lake Ellery Walks, Roaring Billy Walk, Paringa/Haast Cattle Track and Jamie Creek Walk;

- production of a South Westland tourist handbook and a highway map guide incorporating the new features.

"The Government will also allocate a total of \$150,000 over the next three years to the West Coast Tourism Council for tourism promotion," said Mr Palmer. "It will also allocate a total of \$150,000 over the same period for approved grants to assist local entrepreneurs to investigate and establish recreation and tourism based commercial operations."

Mr Palmer also stated that the allocation of land to the Department of Conservation would be made on the basis that it does not prejudice future determinations of applications for mining privileges for minerals, limestone or quarrying, or an assessment of the relevant weight of conservation values and commercial mining opportunity.

The Government has also approved a number of the recommendations from the Secretary for the Environment's report on South Westland's forests. These recommendations, aimed at ensuring the continuation of the local community, include:

- encouragement of harvesting of sphagnum moss on a sustained yield basis on existing and new licence areas, and provision for increasing the term of licences to encourage security and sustainability of management;
- a review of all grazing and industrial leases and licences within former State forests, with a view to providing greater security of tenure;
- a review with the Westland County Council of the adequacy of land adjacent to existing communities to provide for settlement and facilities for fishing, whitebaiting, tourism, industrial and horticultural uses;
- a review of the management practices for whitebait fishing;
- implementation of agreements with local Maori people (and others who fish) on kaimoana areas as soon as practicable;

- giving urgency to the sealing of the Haast highway, east of Haast Pass in view of the potential benefits of a fully sealed road access to the region from the east;

- inviting the Minister of Transport to consider options for retaining the air strip facility at Haast.

An issue which concerned the Secretary for the Environment was the future employment opportunities in Whataroa and Harihari, once the existing production forest allocation in South Westland, north of the Cook River, was exhausted.

Strong submissions were made to revoke the existing sustained yield gazettal on the Saltwater and North Okarito forests, Mr Palmer stated. The proposal was to clearfell up to 7500 hectares of indigenous forest and replanting with Tasmanian Blackwood or other special-purpose species. Government did not agree to this proposal.

Employment Benefits

"The tourism and recreation package for South Westland will have significant employment benefits for Whataroa and Harihari," said Mr Palmer. He added that previous Government commitments to planting up to 10,000 hectares of Tasmanian Blackwood, or other species, would be incorporated as part of the tendering process for cutting rights for existing allocated production forests north of the Cook River.

"Two conditions will be applied to the tenders to assist community viability. They are:

- that local labour be used for planting and tending wherever practicable;
- that planting be no less than 3000 hectares over the first ten years, with a minimum of 200 hectares in any one year during that period.

"As well, Government has agreed that in considering tenders for cutting rights for former State forests north of the Cook River, already allocated for production, thorough consideration will be given to the need to maintain a viable timber industry on the West Coast," concluded Mr Palmer.

J.C.H.