Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions & Transport

FTAA-2606-1255: Application received for referral of the project under the Fast-track Approvals Act 2024 – Stage 1 decisions

Project Name: Western Bays Solar Farm

Date submitted	3 October 2026	**Tracking**	26-BRF-02154
Security level	In-Confidence	**Priority**	Urgent

To	Action sought	Response by
Hon Chris Bishop **Minister for Infrastructure**	Decisions on recommendations in Table A	10 October 2026

Actions for Minister's Office staff	**Return** the signed briefing to: *FTAreferrals@mfe.govt.nz* **Send** email to Ministers to invite written comments
Number of appendices: 3	Appendices: 1. Statutory framework summary 2. Application documents for Western Bays Solar Farm project 3. List of the Māori groups referred to in section 18(2)

Ministry contacts

Name	Position	Telephone	1st contact
Antonia Croft	Principal Author		
Stephanie Frame	Manager	s 9(2)(a)	✓
Ilana Miller	General Manager	s 9(2)(a)	

Project location



Key messages

1. This briefing seeks your initial decisions on an application from Meridian Energy Limited (the applicant) to refer the Western Bays Solar Farm project (the project) under the Fast-track Approvals Act 2024 (the Act) to the fast-track approvals process.
2. At this stage you can either decline an application for the reasons set out section 21, or provide the application to, and invite comments from, the parties identified in section 17. If you do not decline the application, you will receive a further briefing following receipt of comments, to inform your final decision on whether to refer the project.
3. The project is for the development, operation and maintenance of a solar farm and battery energy storage system occupying approximately 620 hectares near Kuratau, in the Waikato region.
4. The project includes:
    a. a solar farm comprising solar photovoltaic panels, inverters and power conversion units, with a generation capacity of up to 420 megawatts (MW);
    b. a battery energy storage system (BESS), with a storage capacity of approximately 250 MW / 2,000 megawatt-hours (MWh), for the storage and supply of electricity to support grid stability and security of supply;
    c. a 33 kilovolt (kV) underground electricity network, a 33/220 kV onsite substation,

operational facilities, buildings, perimeter fencing and mitigation planting;

d. sheep grazing beneath the solar panels;

e. a 220 kV double-circuit transmission line approximately 9.7 kilometres long, supported by towers up to 60 metres high, connecting the solar farm substation to the Grid Injection Point;

f. a 220 kV Grid Injection Point (GIP) connecting the project to Transpower's Bunnythorpe–Whakamaru A and B 220 kV transmission lines;

g. associated construction activities, including earthworks, vegetation clearance, laydown areas, access works, road widening and supporting infrastructure; and

h. groundwater take and use from an existing bore during construction and operation

5. The project will require the proposed approvals:

   a. consents under the Resource Management Act 1991

   b. an archaeological authority under the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014

6. The majority of the project site is land use classification (LUC) Class 3 land.

7. The project includes Māori freehold land (Part Hauhungaroa 1D3B Block), which will host the proposed Grid Injection Point and part of the transmission line corridor. However, it does not involve Māori customary land, a Māori reservation, a customary marine title area, or a protected customary rights area, and no determination is sought under sections 23 or 24 of the Act. For the purposes of section 5(1)(a)(ii), the Proprietors of Hauhungaroa 1D3B have provided written confirmation, in principle, to grant the easements and leases required for the Grid Injection Point and transmission line.

8. We have undertaken initial analysis of the referral application, and this is presented along with our considerations and recommendations in Table A.

9. We have decided the application is complete and complies with section 14 of the Act, as the application complies with section 13 requirements, may be capable of satisfying the criteria in section 22 and does not appear to involve an ineligible activity. The applicable fee and levy have been paid.

10. We recommend you progress consideration of the referral application to the next stage of analysis (Stage 2) and invite written comments from the parties prescribed in section 17(1) of the Act being:

    a. Waikato Regional Council and Taupō District Council as the relevant local authorities

    b. the Minister for the Environment, the Minister for Māori Crown Relations: Te Arawhiti, and the Minister for Māori Development

    c. the Minister for Arts Heritage and Culture, the Minister for Energy and Minister of Climate Change as the other relevant portfolio Ministers

    d. Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga as the relevant administering agency

    e. the owners of Māori land within the project area (proprietors of land parcel Hauhungaroa 1D3B) and other parties in Appendix 3 as the other identified Māori groups.

11. We recommend that you invite written comments from the following as an additional persons under section 17(5) of the Act:

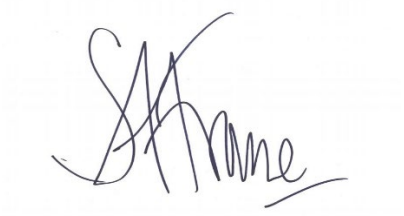
a. the Chief Executive of Transpower New Zealand Limited
b. the Chief Executive of The Lines Company Limited
c. the Chief Executive of NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi
d. the Chief Executive of the Department of Conservation
e. the Minister for Regional Development
f. the Minister for Economic Growth

12. We recommend that under section 20 you request further information from the applicant as detailed in Table A.

Action sought

13. Please indicate your decisions on the recommendations in Table A.

Signature



Stephanie Frame
Manager – Fast-track Operations

Table A: Stage 1 analysis

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Project details</td><td>Project Name</td><td>Applicant</td><td colspan="4">Project Area</td></tr>
<tr><td>Western Bays Solar Farm</td><td>Meridian Energy Limited</td><td colspan="4">The project area comprises approximately 620 hectares across multiple land parcels near Kuratau in the Waikato region, including Māori freehold land associated with the Grid Injection Point and transmission line corridor.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Project description</td><td colspan="6">The project is for the development, operation and maintenance of a solar farm and battery energy storage system.
The project includes:
• a solar farm comprising solar photovoltaic panels, inverters and power conversion units, with a generation capacity of up to 420 megawatts (MW);
• a battery energy storage system (BESS), with a storage capacity of approximately 250 MW / 2,000 megawatt-hours (MWh), for the storage and supply of electricity to support grid stability and security of supply;
• a 33 kilovolt (kV) underground electricity network, a 33/220 kV onsite substation, operational facilities, buildings, perimeter fencing and mitigation planting;
• sheep grazing beneath the solar panels;
• a 220 kV double-circuit transmission line approximately 9.7 kilometres long, supported by towers up to 60 metres high, connecting the solar farm substation to the Grid Injection Point;
• a 220 kV Grid Injection Point (GIP) connecting the project to Transpower's Bunnythorpe–Whakamaru A and B 220 kV transmission lines;
• associated construction activities, including earthworks, vegetation clearance, laydown areas, access works, road widening and supporting infrastructure; and
• groundwater take and use from an existing bore during construction and operation

The project will require the proposed approvals:
• consents under the Resource Management Act 1991
• an archaeological authority under the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014

*We note that the application does not seek approvals under the Wildlife Act 1953. The application identified actual and potential effects on long-tailed bats/pekapeka-tou-roa (Chalinolobus tuberculatus), including the removal of approximately 6.2 km of woody vegetation and habitat, and potential effects on indigenous bird species and lizard habitat. In response to enquiries to clarify if Wildlife Act authorisations would be sought as part of this application, the applicant stated: “Meridian is aware of this and appreciates the clarification”, referring to information that any Wildlife Act approvals required for the project would need to be obtained separately because they cannot be added to the fast-track process at a later stage.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Notification and/or consultation undertaken</td><td colspan="6">As required by section 11, the applicant has:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Notified in writing,
the relevant local authorities</td><td>Notified in writing,
the relevant iwi authorities, hapū and Treaty settlement entities</td><td>Consulted,
the relevant MACA groups</td><td>Consulted,
ngā hapū o Ngāti Porou</td><td>Notified in writing,
the relevant administering agencies</td><td>Notified in writing,
the holder of land to be exchanged</td></tr>
<tr><td>Waikato Regional Council
Taupō District Council</td><td>Te Kotahitanga ko Ngāti Tūwharetoa
Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board
Ngāti Parekaawa
Raukawa Settlement Trust</td><td>N/A</td><td>N/A</td><td>Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga</td><td>N/A</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="7">Section 22 assessment criteria</td></tr>
<tr><td>The project is an infrastructure or development project that would have significant regional or national benefits [section 22(1)(a)]</td><td colspan="6">The Minister must consider a relevant Government policy statement (GPS) [s22(1A)]
The only current relevant GPS is the Government Policy Statement on Grocery Competition. The project does not include commercial activities will include a supermarket development or grocery related activities; therefore, we consider the Government Policy Statement on Grocery Competition is not relevant to your decision.

You may consider any of the following matters, or any other matters the Minister considers relevant:

Will deliver new regionally or nationally significant infrastructure or enable the continued functioning of existing regionally or nationally significant infrastructure [s22(2)(a)(ii)]
The applicant stated that the project is a nationally significant renewable electricity generation project that would:
• generate up to 420 MW of renewable electricity and approximately 870 gigawatt hours (GWh) per year, equivalent to around 2.1% of New Zealand's current electricity generation;
• contribute to meeting forecast increases in electricity demand and support electrification of transport, industry and other sectors; and
• deliver significant national and regional benefits through renewable electricity generation, battery storage capacity and electricity system resilience
The applicant stated that the project includes:
• a 420 MW solar farm;
• battery energy storage systems (BESS) with an aggregated capacity of approximately 250 MW and up to 8 hours of storage;
• a 220 kV double-circuit transmission line approximately 9.7 km in length connecting the solar farm substation to the Grid Injection Point;
• a 220 kV Grid Injection Point (GIP) connecting the project to Transpower's Bunnythorpe–Whakamaru A and B 220 kV lines and the National Grid; and</td></tr>
</table>

	• an onsite 33/220 kV substation and associated electrical infrastructure required to establish and operate the project. *Will deliver significant economic benefits [s22(2)(a)(iv)]* The applicant stated that the project would deliver significant economic benefits, including: • approximately $758 million in capital investment; • approximately 280 direct Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs at peak construction, with an average of approximately 60 construction jobs during the five-year construction period; • approximately 6–20 permanent operational jobs over the life of the project; • secondary economic benefits for local and regional businesses, including freight, logistics, accommodation, hospitality, transport and traffic management services; and • broader economic benefits associated with increasing renewable electricity generation, supporting energy security, and contributing to New Zealand's transition to a low-emissions economy *Will support development of natural resources, including minerals and petroleum [s22(2)(a)(vi)]* The applicant stated that sunlight is a natural renewable resource that the Project will utilise to convert to electricity. *Will support climate change mitigation, including the reduction or removal of greenhouse gas emissions [s22(2)(a)(vii)]* The applicant stated that the project directly addresses climate change mitigation by outlining that the project would: • generate up to 420 MW of renewable electricity and approximately 870 GWh per year, contributing to New Zealand's transition to a low-emissions economy; • support national climate change mitigation and electrification targets, including New Zealand's target of net zero emissions by 2050; • support Electrify NZ, a key action in New Zealand's Second Emissions Reduction Plan (2026–2030), which aims to double renewable electricity generation; and • contribute directly to increasing renewable electricity generation as a matter of national significance. *Will support climate change adaptation, reduce risks arising from natural hazards, or support recovery from events caused by natural hazards [s22(2)(a)(viii)]* The applicant stated that the project would: • support electricity system resilience and security of supply through battery energy storage systems (BESS), with capacity of around 250MW / 2000 MWh; • be located outside areas of identified high natural hazard risk as identified on relevant hazard maps under the district plan; and • contribute to resilience against natural hazard events and electricity supply disruptions through diversification of electricity generation sources. *Will address significant environmental issues [s22(2)(a)(ix)]* The applicant stated that the project would: • provide a meaningful increase in renewable electricity generation. • support reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. • contribute to New Zealand's response to climate change through decarbonisation of the electricity sector. *Is consistent with local or regional planning documents, including spatial strategies [s22(2)(a)(x)]* The applicant identified consistency with: • New Zealand's Emissions Reduction Plans, including support for national climate change mitigation and electrification objectives; • the National Policy Statement for Renewable Electricity Generation 2011 (as amended in December 2025), which recognises the national significance of increasing renewable electricity generation; • the New Zealand Infrastructure Strategy 2022–2052 and the National Infrastructure Plan 2026, which support investment in infrastructure required to meet New Zealand's future energy needs; and • the Waikato Regional Policy Statement, Waikato Regional Plan and Taupō District Plan, which recognise and provide for renewable electricity generation, electricity transmission infrastructure, and the sustainable use of natural and physical resources.
Referring the project to the fast-track approvals process [section 22(1)(b)]	*Would facilitate the project, including by enabling it to be processed in a more timely and cost-effective way than under normal processes [s22(1)(b)(i)]* The applicant stated that referral of the project to the fast-track approvals process would: • enable the project to be processed "faster under the Fast-track process than the traditional RMA consenting pathway", noting that a standard RMA process is likely to involve notification, a hearing and potentially Environment Court appeals, which "typically takes around 2–3 years (sometimes longer)" and results in significant costs and uncertainty; • reduce potential delays and uncertainties associated with appeals, as appeals under the Act are limited to questions of law to the High Court, compared with broader appeal rights to the Environment Court under the RMA; • provide "a condensed timeframe for a decision on the resource consent applications and one forum/process for consideration for the proposal", including consideration of multiple approvals required under different Acts; • provide "more certainty around timeframes and costs for delivering this project", noting that the usual consent process can impose a significant barrier to new renewable electricity developments; and • move efficiency and cost-effectiveness through a "one stop shop" approach, including obtaining the Archaeological Authority as part of the fast-track process. The applicant stated that the project is a "large-scale renewable electricity development" that will provide significant benefits and form part of the renewable electricity generation pipeline required in New Zealand, and that the project "aligns with the nature and scale of initiatives that the Act was enacted to provide for." *Is unlikely to materially affect the efficient operation of the fast-track approvals process [s22(1)(b)(ii)]* The applicant stated that the project is at an advanced stage of development, with a comprehensive suite of technical assessments either already completed or underway and soon to be completed, and that Meridian has undertaken, and continues to undertake, comprehensive engagement with Mana Whenua and stakeholders.

	The applicant stated that this level of readiness would provide an expert panel with a well-defined information base upon which to assess the application, reducing the likelihood of delays commonly associated with incomplete or under-developed proposals. The applicant further stated that the project is unlikely to create undue pressure on the processing system or delay the progression of other applications and is well-placed to proceed efficiently through the Fast-track process, without imposing an undue burden on the system or compromising the integrity of decision-making on this or other projects.		
Minister invites comments	*You **must** copy the application to, and invite written comments from [s17(1)]:* a. relevant local authorities: – Waikato Regional Council – Taupō District Council b. the Minister for the Environment, the Minister for Māori Crown Relations: Te Arawhiti, and the Minister for Māori Development c. other relevant portfolio Ministers: – Minister Minister for Arts Heritage and Culture, – the Minister for Energy – Minister of Climate Change d. relevant administering agencies: – Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga e. the owners of Māori land in the project area identified in Appendix 3 proprietors of land parcel Hauhungaroa 1D3B f. the other Māori groups identified in Appendix 3	*You **may** copy the application to, and invite written comments from, any other person [s17(5)]:* We recommend you invite comments from the following additional persons, for the specified reasons: a. the Chief Executive of Transpower New Zealand Limited as the project proposes connection to the National Grid b. the Chief Executive of The Lines Company Limited as local electricity network operator c. the Chief Executive of NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi due to the interface with SH32 and associated construction activities d. Chief Executive of the Department of Conservation to confirm that there are no marginal strips in the project site (noting that titles within the site refer to Part IVA Conservation Act 1987). e. Minister for Regional Development f. Minister for Economic Growth	*The Minister **may** request further information about a referral application from the applicant, the relevant local authorities, or the relevant administering agencies to be provided within the time frame specified in the request.* N/A

Recommendations	**Minister's decision**
a. **Note** that section 25 of the Act permits you to decline the referral application without inviting comments from the parties under section 17.	Noted
b. **Note** that you have not yet provided the application to, nor sought any written comments on it from, the parties listed in section 17(1) but that you are required to do so if you do not decline the application under section 21 of the Act.	Noted
c. **Note** that section 17(5) of the Act permits you to forward an application to, and invite written comments from, any other person.	Noted
d. **Note** that if comments have been sought and provided within the required time frame you are required to consider it, along with the referral application, before deciding to decline the application.	Noted
e. **Note** that section 20 of the Act permits you to request further information from the applicant or relevant local authorities or relevant administering agencies at any time before you decide whether to accept or decline an application.	Noted
f. **Agree** to progress the Western Bays Solar Farm project to our Stage 2 analysis (invite written comments and request section 18 Treaty report).	Yes / No
g. **Agree** to provide the application to, and invite written comments from:	
i. Taupō District Council and Waikato Regional Council the relevant local authorities under section 17(1)(a)	Yes / No
ii. the Minister for the Environment, the Minister for Māori Crown Relations: Te Arawhiti, and the Minister for Māori Development under section 17(1)(b)	Yes / No
iii. the Minister for Arts Heritage and Culture, the Minister for Energy and Minister of Climate Change as the other relevant portfolio Ministers under section 17(1)(b)	Yes / No
iv. Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga as the relevant administering agencies under section 17(1)(c)	Yes / No
v. the parties in Appendix 3 as the identified Māori groups under section 17(1)(d)	Yes / No
vi. owners of Māori land in the project area identified in Appendix 4 - proprietors of land parcel Hauhungaroa 1D3B	Yes / No
vii. any parties you are required to invite comments from under section 17(1)(d) and (e) who may be subsequently identified	Yes / No
h. **Agree** to provide the application to and invite written comments from the following additional persons under section 17(5):	

i. the Chief Executive of Transpower New Zealand Limited	Yes / No
ii. the Chief Executive of The Lines Company Limited	Yes / No
iii. the Chief Executive of NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi	Yes / No
iv. the Chief Executive of the Department of Conservation	Yes / No
v. Minister for Regional Development	Yes / No
vi. Minister for Economic Growth	Yes / No
i. **Note** that you have agreed to delegate to the Secretary for the Environment your responsibility to send all correspondence, other than to Ministers.	Noted
j. **Agree** to send the email to invite written comments from Ministers.	Yes / No

Signed:

Hon Chris Bishop
Minister for Infrastructure **Date:**

Appendix 1: Statutory framework summary

1. You are the sole decision maker for referral applications. If you accept a referral application, then the whole or part of the project will be referred to the fast-track approvals process.
2. If a Treaty settlement, the Marine and Coastal Area (Takutai Moana) Act 2011, the Ngā Rohe Moana o Ngā Hapū o Ngāti Porou Act 2019, a Mana Whakahono ā Rohe or a joint management agreement provides for consideration of any document or procedural requirements, you must, where relevant:
    a. give the document the same or equivalent effect through this process as it would have under any specified Act; and
    b. comply with any applicable procedural requirements.
3. You must decline a referral application if:
    a. you are satisfied the project does not meet the referral criteria in s22
    b. you are satisfied the project involves an ineligible activity (s5)
    c. you consider you do not have adequate information to inform your decision.
4. You may decline an application for any other reason, including those set out in s21(5) and even if the application meets the s22 referral criteria.
5. You can decline an application before or after inviting comments under s17(1). However, if comments have been sought and provided within the required time frame, you must consider them, along with the referral application, before deciding to decline the application.
6. If you do not decline a referral application at this initial stage you must copy the application to, and invite written comments from:
    a. the relevant local authorities
    b. the Minister for the Environment, the Minister for Māori Crown Relations: Te Arawhiti, and the Minister for Māori Development
    c. any other relevant portfolio Ministers
    d. the relevant administering agencies
    e. the Māori groups identified by the responsible agency
    f. the owners of Māori land in the project area (if applicable)
    g. you may provide the application to and invite comments from any other person.
7. You can request further information from an applicant, any relevant local authority or any relevant administering agency at any time before you decide to decline or accept a referral application (see section 20 of the Act).
8. However, if further information has been sought and provided within the required time frame you must consider it, along with the referral application, before deciding to decline the application.

Appendix 2: Application documents for Western Bays Solar Farm project

Appendix 3: List of the Māori groups referred to in section 18(2)

List of Māori groups to be invited to comment (for Stage 1 briefing)

Name of group	Type of group (section of Act)
Hauhungaroa 1D3B Incorporation	Owners of Māori land in the project area (s17(1)(e))
Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board	iwi authority (s18(2)(a)), Treaty settlement entity – Taupo Waters deed (s18(2)(a)), party to JMA (s18(2)(j))
Te Kotahitanga o Ngāti Tūwharetoa	Treaty settlement entity - Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 (s18(2)(a))
Tūwharetoa Settlement Trust	Treaty settlement entity - Central North Island Forests Land Collective Settlement Act 2008 (s18(2)(a))
CNI Iwi Holdings Trust	Treaty settlement entity - Central North Island Forests Land Collective Settlement Act 2008 (s18(2)(a))
Raukawa Settlement Trust	iwi authority (s18(2)(a)), Treaty settlement entity - Raukawa Claims Settlement Act 2014 (s18(2)(a))
Ngāti Uenukukōpako Iwi Trust	iwi authority (s18(2)(a))
Te Kōpua Kānapanapa	Treaty settlement entity - Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 (s18(2)(a))
Te Whiringa Kākaho o Ngāti Hāua	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Whakarawa Trust	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Hauhungaroa 1D2 Incorporation	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Hauhungaroa 2C Incorporation	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Hauhungaroa 7 Trust	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Hauhungaroa 1C Incorporation	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Ngāti Parekaawa	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Poukura Marae	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))
Ngāti Te Maunga/Whanganui Marae	other Māori group with relevant interests (s18(2)(k))

We have also identified two other Māori land blocks nearby the project are – Hauhungaroa 1B and Hauhungaroa 1D 3A – but we have been unable to locate contact details for the owners/administrators of these blocks.