NEW ZEALAND
CONSERVATION AUTHORITY
TE POU ATAWHAI TAIAO O AOTEAROA

NZCA comment on the Remarkables Ski Area Upgrade and Doolans Expansion

Please include all the contact details listed below with your comments and indicate whether you can receive further communications from us by email.

1. Contact Details			
Please ensure that you have authority to comment on the application on behalf of those named on this form.			
Organisation name (if relevant)	New Zealand Conservation Authority		
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Email ***(a valid email address enables us to communicate efficiently with you)***	nzca@doc.govt.nz		

2. We will email you draft conditions of consent for your comment			
✓	I can receive emails and my email address is correct	☐	I cannot receive emails and my postal address is correct

Thank you for your comments

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New Zealand Conservation Authority – Comments under the Fast-track Approvals Act 2024

1. Introduction

The New Zealand Conservation Authority (NZCA) acknowledges and appreciates the opportunity given by the Expert Consenting Panel (Panel) to comment on the Remarkables Ski Area Upgrade and Doolans Expansion application by NZSki Limited. The NZCA offers these comments in line with its statutory role as an independent body established under the Conservation Act 1987. The Authority's responsibilities include advising on matters of national conservation importance, overseeing the development and implementation of conservation strategies and plans, and ensuring the management of natural and cultural resources aligns with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.

These comments are based on the application, and material required under section 18 of the FTAA, which identifies relevant iwi authorities, Treaty settlement entities, and Marine and Costal Area Act applicants, as well as the Crown's statutory obligations in relation to existing Treaty settlements and customary rights.

The NZCA's views also take into account the Director-General of Conservation's technical advice prepared under section 51 of the FTAA – the covering report, the concessions, wildlife and complex freshwater fisheries reports, and the supporting expert statements – together with the Director-General's advice on the weighting of relevant matters. As that advice notes, while the purpose of the FTAA is to be given the greatest weight, it "does not automatically outweigh all other considerations".

The NZCA offers a national conservation perspective to help the Panel ensure the application is assessed in a way that protects the environment, statutes, and mana whenua rights. While there are economic benefits that will result for the applicant, projects submitted under the FTAA must not compromise Aotearoa's conservation duties or the Crown's responsibilities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

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2. Application Summary

NZSki seeks approvals to upgrade the existing Remarkables Ski Area in the Rastus Burn Recreation Reserve and to expand the ski field over Helicopter Ridge into the adjacent Doolans Basin, within the Remarkables Conservation Area. The proposal includes a gondola from the Rastus Burn base to a mid-station on Helicopter Ridge and a new base building in the Doolans Basin, ski trails and an access road, a water take and weir on Doolans Creek Right Branch, and conversion of 'Tarn 3' into a lined reservoir for snowmaking. On-mountain capacity would increase from around 3,500 to 6,000 people; NZSki has confirmed these figures are practical estimates, not regulatory limits. Two new concessions are sought, each for 40 years, together with wildlife and complex freshwater fisheries approvals and resource consents.

3. The Doolans Basin and its Values

The Doolans Basin is stewardship land within the Remarkables Conservation Area, managed as a Backcountry Visitor Management Zone under the Otago Conservation Management Strategy 2016 (CMS). The CMS lists the Remarkables Conservation Area as a landscape and landform of national significance.

The Director-General's section 51 reporting describes the Basin as follows:

"The basin's connected sequence of ecosystems remains highly intact and close to pristine, providing a rare example of a functioning alpine ecosystem that contributes to the resilience of native species and habitats across the wider region. Many of these natural features have developed over thousands of years and cannot be readily recreated if lost or modified." (DOC s51(2)(a) Concessions Report, 12 October 2026, para 24)

DOC's assessment, supported by its expert statements, identifies that the Basin contains:

- **Glacial landforms.** These include a late-glacial moraine sequence, around 12,000–16,000 years old, which DOC's geomorphology expert regards as an outstanding natural feature of national scientific relevance.
- **Naturally uncommon ecosystems.** These include cushion bog, seepage and string mire wetlands, tarns, moraines and screes of acidic rock. Seepage wetlands are classed as endangered.
- **An essentially unmodified freshwater system.** DOC's freshwater expert describes streams, tributaries, tarns and wetlands forming "a hydrologically connected mosaic".
- **Threatened and at-risk species.** At least 38 nationally and a further 38 regionally Threatened, At Risk or Data Deficient vascular plant species are present, along with at least 25 rare or poorly known invertebrate species. Threatened birds include kea (Nationally Endangered) and eastern falcon (Nationally Vulnerable), as well as New Zealand pipit (At Risk – Declining).
- **Outstanding Natural Landscape.** The whole site is covered by contiguous Outstanding Natural Landscape overlays across both district plans.

4. Relevance to NZCA Functions

The proposal engages the Conservation Act 1987, particularly section 4, which requires that all conservation decisions give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.

In this submission NZCA wishes to comment on:

- whether the expansion is consistent with the purpose for which the Remarkables Conservation Area is held and with the Otago CMS;
- the principles that should govern ski field development on public conservation land; and
- the importance of meaningful engagement with Ngāi Tahu.

These matters fall within the NZCA's statutory functions to:

- Provide oversight of conservation and wildlife management
- Ensure consistency with DOC's statutory responsibilities and best practice standards
- Uphold Treaty principles in conservation-related decision-making; and
- Advise on matters of national conservation importance, including the approval and integrity of conservation management strategies.

5. Assessment Against the Conservation Management Framework

The NZCA has evaluated this proposal against its statutory conservation oversight role, including under the following legislation:

- Conservation Act 1987
- Reserves Act 1977
- Wildlife Act 1953
- Resource Management Act 1991 (and relevant national direction)

The proposal is also assessed against:

- General Policy for Conservation (2005)
- Otago Conservation Management Strategy 2016
- Current Department of Conservation (DOC) operational standards and guidelines.

6. Comments

Approach

The Department of Conservation has undertaken a detailed technical assessment of the application, supported by expert advice on vegetation and ecosystems, freshwater, invertebrates, lizards, birds, landscape, geomorphology, heritage, visitor experience and effects management. The NZCA does not seek to duplicate that work and relies on it. Our comments set out the principles we consider represent best practice for ski field development on public conservation land, and how they apply here.

NZCA Position

The NZCA supports the proposed upgrade within the existing Rastus Burn Recreation Reserve. However, the Authority has significant reservations about the proposed expansion into the Doolans Basin, which in its current form does not adequately address the conservation concerns identified in this submission.

The NZCA considers that any expansion would need to satisfactorily address the matters identified by the Director-General of Conservation and demonstrate how significant adverse effects on conservation values would be avoided or appropriately managed.

The central question for the Authority is whether a ski field can extend into a highly intact backcountry basin on stewardship land in a way that is light, contained and reversible, without becoming a platform for further development. Given the projected effects of climate change on snow in the Queenstown Lakes mountains, the Authority considers that any approval must also assume the infrastructure will one day need to be removed and must be designed and secured on that basis.

What the NZCA supports

The Conservation Act directs DOC to foster recreation on public conservation land and, where consistent with conservation, to allow for tourism. The CMS recognises the Remarkables ski field as a highly valued recreation and tourism opportunity providing for intensive use and provides that further development of existing ski fields may occur in preference to new ski fields. The NZCA agrees building on an existing ski area that already has an access road, car parks, wastewater and a base area is better than establishing a new ski field elsewhere.

The NZCA therefore supports the upgrade of the existing ski area within the Rastus Burn Recreation Reserve. The Director-General finds those activities consistent with the purpose of the reserve and with the CMS, subject to conditions.

The Doolans Basin

The Director-General reaches different conclusions for the Doolans Basin and Helicopter Ridge. DOC considers that the activities sought there are inconsistent with the purpose for which the Remarkables Conservation Area is held, and with the key CMS objectives, outcomes and policies, including that ridgelines remain in their natural state, that the Basin is managed as backcountry, and that a precautionary approach be taken to new structures and terrain modification. DOC also identifies significant adverse effects, including the total loss of Tarn 3, loss of wetland and stream habitat and of naturally uncommon ecosystems, and permanent modification of a nationally significant late-glacial moraine sequence. It considers the information provided insufficient in several respects and the compensation proposed inadequate.

The NZCA agrees with those findings. Our support for any expansion into the Doolans Basin is therefore conditional: it should proceed only if it is redesigned to meet the principles below, and only once the matters the Director-General has identified are resolved.

Climate change and end of life

The long-term viability of skiing in the Doolans Basin depends on natural snow cover and on making more snow. The Director-General notes that the applicant's climate information relies on two publications from 2012, that no assessment of the likely trajectory of climate change by

a suitably qualified professional has been provided, and that it is not known whether more water could be sourced or stored for additional snowmaking (DOC Concessions Report, paras 29–30, 213). CMS Policy 3.25.2 requires a precautionary approach that considers the likely longevity of a ski field in the face of climate change, and the costs of land remediation and facility removal should it cease to operate.

DOC's expert advice projects warming of 1.5–2.5°C across the new skiable terrain over the next 35–40 years, with the winter freezing level regularly rising above 1,600 m and a shorter natural snow season (DOC expert statement on terrestrial ecology, Appendix A, Table 2). Within the life of the proposed infrastructure, skiing in its current form may not be sustainable.

For these reasons the Authority considers that design for disassembly, and secured restoration at the end of operations, are not optional extras. They are central to whether the application can be approved and are addressed in Principle 5.

Principles for any development in the Doolans Basin

Principle 1 – One ski area, built on what already exists

- The Doolans Basin should be an extension of the existing ski area, not a second ski area. Facilities in the Basin should be the minimum needed for safe skiing. Servicing, parking, and other facilities should be provided from the existing Rastus Burn base.
- No hotels, accommodation or other commercial uses should be permitted. Any approval should be confined to the footprint and activities applied for, so that Doolans Basin does not become a beachhead for future development: any expansion or change of use should require a separate full assessment.
- The concession area should be limited to the area actually used. The proposed licence land extends well beyond the development footprint, including into the northern sub-basins. It should be reduced to avoid the unintended possibility of activity spreading across the Basin.

Principle 2 – Tread lightly

- Structures should be of the minimum scale needed, sited and designed to sit lightly in the landscape, and built from low-carbon materials, without above-ground masonry or exposed concrete. Where retaining is unavoidable, walls should be removable, such as gabions filled with local rock or similar.
- The loss of Tarn 3, and any modification of the late-glacial moraine sequence, should be avoided. The Director-General finds there are no adequate methods to remedy or mitigate either effect, and that alternative water storage locations have not been adequately investigated.
- Development on Helicopter Ridge is inconsistent with the CMS, as the Director-General finds, because the ridgeline would not remain in its natural state. The NZCA considers that alternative locations or designs for the mid-station that avoid the ridgeline should be assessed.
- Any planting or revegetation should use eco-sourced plants from the ecological district.

Principle 3 – One groomed trail, winter only

- Grooming should be limited to one main trail, consistent with the advice of DOC's terrestrial ecology expert (DOC Concessions Report, para 95). Each additional groomed slope adds earthworks and ongoing grooming effects on soils, wetlands and vegetation, which DOC's experts describe.
- NZSki's commercial operations in the Doolans Basin should be limited to ski field and snow-based activities. Summer commercial operations, including summer gondola access and the construction of summer-use trails, should not be permitted unless their effects have been properly assessed and shown to be acceptable. DOC's experts find that the effects of summer visitor and road use have not yet been assessed. Public access to the Basin on foot should be maintained.
- Roads should be for operational use only. The new access road should not be open to public vehicles or used to provide tourism activities.

Principle 4 – Care for the whole catchment

- The proposal should bring direct benefits to conservation in the catchment. A plant and animal pest management plan should be developed for the public conservation land in the catchment, including options to work with iwi and local conservation groups. It should begin before works start and then be implemented and independently monitored.
- The concessionaire should carry out an annual summer clean of the entire area and report on it.
- Compensation should be proportionate to the values lost. The NZCA supports the Director-General's findings that the proposed package is inadequate and that concession fees are not compensation.
- Consistent with the CMS, the ski field's location on public conservation land, and conservation interpretation, should be readily apparent to visitors. This should be funded by the concessionaire and delivered by the Department.

Principle 5 – Plan for the end from the start

- All structures in the Doolans Basin and on Helicopter Ridge should be designed for disassembly and fully removed, including their foundations, leaving no trace. Removal should take place at the end of operations, or sooner if any structure is no longer required for ski field operations during the term of the concession. This covers the Helicopter Ridge mid-station, patrol hut and lookout structures; the Doolans Gondola Return Station and control room; the Doolans Base Building; the gondola towers; the learners' area covered conveyor; the water intake weir, pump station and snowmaking pump shed; and water storage tanks, snowmaking equipment and other secondary infrastructure.
- Restoration should be secured by a bond, set following an independent risk assessment, and by a rehabilitation and closure plan approved before works begin. A parent-company guarantee alone is not enough. Removal obligations should include underground infrastructure such as pipes, tanks and wastewater mains.

- If operations cease, the trail and roads should be de-groomed and restored as closely as practicable to their natural state.
- The ecological assessments proposed at 10, 20 and 30 years should also review the viability of continued operation under a changing climate, and whether the bond remains adequate.

Monitoring

Any approval should be supported by robust and enforceable conditions, with clear targets, triggers and remedial actions, independent monitoring through construction and operation, and the ability to suspend activities where conditions are not met. The NZCA supports the Director-General's proposed amendments to the concession conditions and the section 78 conditions directed by DOC.

7. Treaty Responsibilities under Section 4 of the Conservation Act

Section 4 of the Conservation Act 1987 requires that the Act (and all Acts referred to in Schedule 1 including the Reserves Act and Wildlife Act) be interpreted and administered to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. This principle is integral across all aspects of conservation governance.

The NZCA assesses whether the project:

- Recognises mana whenua and their enduring relationship to the affected area
- Demonstrates alignment with Treaty settlement instruments, including statutory acknowledgements
- Involves early, genuine, and culturally grounded engagement with iwi and hapū
- Protects and upholds Māori customary rights and decision-making roles.

Engagement with Ngāi Tahu

Kawarau / The Remarkables is wāhi tūpuna to Ngāi Tahu, and the project area is subject to the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998. Taonga species are present and affected, including pīhoihoi (New Zealand pipit), kārearea (eastern falcon) and kea, as well as taramea and wīwī.

It is important that engagement with Ngāi Tahu takes place in a meaningful and substantive way, consistent with the Treaty principles of partnership, informed decision-making and active protection. The NZCA notes that Kā Rūnaka are expected to provide their views, including a Treaty impact assessment, through the comment process. The NZCA asks the Panel to give those views careful weight, and to be satisfied that Ngāi Tahu have been able to engage fully and in good faith before reaching a decision.

8. NZCA Position and Recommendations to the Expert Panel

Overall position

The NZCA thanks the Panel for the opportunity to comment on this application under the FTAA. The Authority supports recreation and tourism on public conservation land, and supports the further development of the existing Remarkables ski field in preference to a new ski field.

However, this should not come at the expense of New Zealand's conservation responsibilities or the Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Threshold for consideration

Any expansion into the Doolans Basin would need to meet a high threshold, including:

- one ski area, serviced from the existing base, with no accommodation or other uses and any future expansion subject to separate assessment and approval;
- avoidance of the values the Director-General finds cannot be remedied or mitigated, including Tarn 3 and the moraine sequence;
- one main groomed trail, winter use only, and operational roads only;
- catchment-wide pest management and proportionate compensation;
- structures that can be fully removed, with restoration secured by a bond and closure plan; and
- meaningful and substantive engagement with Ngāi Tahu.

The proposal, as presented, does not yet meet this threshold.

Recommendations

The NZCA recommends that the Panel:

- approves the upgrade within the Rastus Burn Recreation Reserve, subject to the conditions proposed by the Director-General;
- gives weight to the Director-General's findings that the Doolans Basin component, as proposed, is inconsistent with the purpose for which the land is held and with the Otago CMS;
- approves any expansion into the Doolans Basin only if it is redesigned to meet the five principles above, and the information gaps, alternatives (including for Tarn 3) and compensation matters identified by the Director-General are resolved;
- secures those principles through enforceable concession and consent conditions, including limits on the approved development footprint and activities, a bond and closure plan, and catchment-wide pest management; and
- ensures that engagement with Ngāi Tahu is meaningful and substantive and gives weight to the views of Kā Rūnaka.