Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions & Transport

# FTAA-2606-1255 application received for referral of the project under the Fast-track Approvals Act 2024 – Stage 2 decisions

## Project Name: Western Bays Solar Farm

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| **Date submitted** | 30 October 2026 | **Tracking** | 26-BRF-02682 |
| **Security level** | In-Confidence | **Priority** | Urgent |

| To | Action sought | Response by |
|---|---|---|
| Hon Chris Bishop<br>**Minister for Infrastructure** | Decisions on recommendations | [Date] |

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| **Actions for Minister's Office staff** | **Return** the signed briefing to: *FTAreferrals@mcert.govt.nz*<br>**Send** email to Ministers to invite written comments |
| **Number of appendices:** 6 | Appendices:<br>1. Statutory framework for making decisions<br>2. Application documents for Western Bays Solar Farm<br>3. Stage 1 Briefing Note and decisions<br>4. Section 18 Report on Treaty settlements and other obligations<br>5. Comments received from invited parties<br>6. Further information received from the applicant<br>7. Draft Notice of Decisions |

## Ministry contacts

| Name | Position | Telephone | 1st contact |
|---|---|---|---|
| Antonia Croft | Principal Author | | |
| Stephanie Frame | Manager | s9(2)(a) | ✓ |
| Ilana Miller | General Manager | s9(2)(a) | |

## Project location




*Figure 1*

## Key messages

1. This briefing seeks your decisions under section 21 of the Fast-track Approvals Act 2024 (the Act) on the application from Meridian Energy Limited (the applicant) to refer the Western Bays Solar Farm (the project) to the fast-track approvals process.
2. A copy of the application is in Appendix 2. This is the second briefing on this application. The first (Stage 1) briefing (BRF-02154) with your initial decisions annotated is in Appendix 3.
3. The project is the construction, operation and maintenance of a solar farm and battery energy storage system occupying approximately 620 hectares (ha), together with a transmission line, substation, Grid Injection Point and ancillary buildings and infrastructure, near Kuratau in the Waikato region, and includes:
    a. a solar farm with a generation capacity of up to 420 megawatts (MW), including solar photovoltaic panels, inverters, power conversion and storage blocks incorporating battery energy storage systems (BESS), with an aggregated storage capacity of approximately 250 MW, for the storage and supply of electricity to support grid stability and security of supply and associated electrical infrastructure;
    b. a 33 kilovolt (kV) underground electricity network, and a 33/220 kV onsite substation, together with operational facilities, buildings, perimeter fencing and mitigation planting;

c. stock grazing beneath the solar panels;

d. a 220 kV double-circuit transmission line approximately 9.7 km in length, supported by towers up to 60 m high, connecting the solar farm substation to the Grid Injection Point;

e. a 220 kV Grid Injection Point connecting the project to the National Grid Bunnythorpe-Whakamaru A and B 220 kV transmission lines;

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

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

4. The project seeks all necessary approvals and will require:

   a. resource consents and certificates of compliance under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA); and

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

5. We recommend you **accept** the referral application as the project meets the criteria set out in section 22 and does not appear to involve an ineligible activity.

6. We seek your decisions on this recommendation and on the proposed directions to the applicant, the expert panel and notification of your decisions.

## Assessment against statutory framework

7. The statutory framework for your decision-making is set out in Appendix 1. You must apply this framework when you are deciding whether to accept or decline the referral application and when deciding on any further requirements or directions associated with referral of the project.

8. Before accepting the project, you must consider the application (in Appendix 2), the section 18 Treaty settlements report (in Appendix 4), any comments from invited parties (in Appendix 5), any further information provided by the applicant (in Appendix 6), and any document that requires your consideration under section 16. You must also comply with the procedural requirements in section 16. Having considered these matters, you may accept the application if you are satisfied it meets the criteria in section 22 of the Act and there are no reasons requiring you to decline the application. We provide our advice on these matters below.

9. We have considered if there are any reasons for declining the project, and provide our advice on these matters below.

### Section 18 Treaty settlements and other obligations report

10. The section 18 report identifies the relevant Māori groups for the project area, including Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board, Te Kotahitanga o Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Tūwharetoa Settlement Trust, CNI Iwi Holdings Trust, Raukawa Settlement Trust, Ngāti Uenukukōpako Iwi Trust and Te Kōpua Kānapanapa. It also identifies other Māori groups with potentially relevant interests and the owners/administrators of Māori land.

11. The report identifies five Treaty settlements relevant to the project area;

    a. the 2007 Lake Taupō deed

b. Central North Island Forests Land Collective Settlement Act 2008

c. Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Raukawa, and Te Arawa River Iwi Waikato River Act 2010

d. Raukawa Claims Settlement Act 2014

e. Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018.

12. The relevant provisions arise from the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 and relate to Te Kōpua Kānapanapa and Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki (Taupō Catchment Plan). The settlement provides for Ngāti Tūwharetoa participation in resource management decision-making within the Taupō Catchment, which includes the project area. Relevant procedural requirements concern notification of certain resource consent applications, appointment of hearing commissioners and consideration of Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki.

13. The project area is also within the scope of a 2009 joint management agreement (JMA) between Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board and Taupō District Council (TDC) relating to notified resource consents and private plan changes on or affecting multiply-owned Māori land.

14. The project includes proposed resource consents for activities on or affecting Hauhungaroa 1D3B Block, which the section 18 report identifies as Māori freehold land.

15. While the project includes electricity infrastructure on Māori freehold land administered by Hauhungaroa 1D3B Incorporation, the landowners have provided written agreement to the proposed activity and, accordingly, a determination under section 23 of the Act is not required and the project does not include an ineligible activity under section 5(1)(a).

16. No comments were received from Māori groups invited to comment on the referral application under section 17 of the Act.

17. We consider the section 18 report does not raise any matters that would make it more appropriate to authorise the proposed approvals under another Act or Acts.

**Section 16 Effects of Treaty settlements and other obligations on decision-making**

18. The section 18 report identifies relevant procedural requirements and a document requiring consideration in relation to a substantive application for the project. These arise from the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 and the 2009 JMA between Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board and TDC.

19. Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki is also relevant. It sets out the vision, objectives, desired outcomes and values for the Taupō Catchment. The section 18 report records that TDC has incorporated Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki into the strategic direction of the Taupō District Plan, while Waikato Regional Council (WRC) has yet to recognise and provide for it in its regional RMA planning documents. The report therefore considers that the requirement to have particular regard to Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki applies to regional RMA matters.

20. Accordingly, if you accept the referral application, we recommend that you direct the panel to comply with the relevant procedural requirements identified in the section 18 report, including requirements relating to Te Kōpua Kānapanapa, appointment of hearing commissioners, consideration of Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki, and the applicable requirements of the 2009 JMA.

**Written comments received**

21. Comments were received from WRC, six Ministers, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga (HNZPT), Transpower New Zealand Limited (Transpower), NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi (NZTA), and the Department of Conservation (DOC). No comments were received from TDC except in relation to competing applications, and none were received from Māori groups. The key points of relevance to your decision are summarised in Table AA.

22. The key points from the comments are:

    a. the Minister for Energy considered the project would deliver regionally and nationally significant infrastructure through large-scale renewable electricity generation and battery storage, and make a significant contribution to New Zealand's energy system

    b. the Minister for Economic Growth considered the project is likely to deliver significant national economic benefits through investment, renewable electricity generation and battery storage, and contributions to electricity security and resilience

    c. the Minister for Regional Development considered the project may be regionally significant, particularly through its contribution to regionally and nationally significant infrastructure, increased electricity supply and storage, affordability and resilience, and district-level employment opportunities

    d. the Minister for Māori Development and Minister for Māori Crown Relations supported the application progressing and encouraged consideration of relevant Treaty settlement legislation and instruments, and any feedback received from relevant Māori groups

    e. WRC advised that it was not aware of any competing applications, did not consider the project involved an ineligible activity, and did not consider any reasons to decline applied. WRC identified ecological, contaminated land, highly productive land and water management matters to be addressed through any substantive application

    f. TDC advised that there were no competing applications for the project area and had no further comments on the application

    g. HNZPT advised that the applicant's archaeological assessment identified no recorded archaeological sites within the project area and a very low likelihood of effects on unrecorded archaeological sites, and anticipated further engagement on cultural heritage matters should the project proceed to the substantive stage

    h. Transpower supported the development of new generation and storage capacity and advised it is continuing to work with the applicant on the design of the Grid Injection Point. Transpower identified matters relating to the protection and operation of the National Grid to be addressed through any substantive application

    i. NZTA advised that the transport upgrades and approvals required for the project can be addressed through conditions and subsequent approvals, and did not identify any concerns that would prevent the project progressing to the substantive stage

    j. DOC identified potential ecological and Conservation Act matters for further consideration but did not identify any reason why the project should not proceed through the fast-track process.

**Further information provided by applicant**

23. In response to your request for further information under section 20 of the Act the applicant provided further information regarding streams, tributaries, wetlands, qualifying water bodies and potential marginal strips within the project area. The further information was requested following comments from DOC, WRC, and matters identified through the section 18 report regarding freshwater features within the project area and the potential relevance of Conservation Act 1987 and Treaty settlement arrangements.

24. The applicant provided additional mapping and assessment information on the location, extent and status of freshwater features and potential marginal strips within the project area. The applicant considers that the project does not require any approvals under the Conservation Act 1987.

25. We have considered this further information in our analysis and advice in Table A.

**Reasons to decline**

26. The statutory framework in Appendix 1 sets out the situations where you must decline the application for referral under section 21(3). We do not consider you must decline this application.

27. You may also decline the application for any other reason under section 21(4). The Act gives some guidance on matters you could consider when deciding whether to decline an application and these are set out in Appendix 1.

28. The project would utilise land identified as highly productive land for solar generation. WRC noted that the project would result in the loss of highly productive land and raised questions regarding consistency with the National Policy Statement for Highly Productive Land 2022 (NPS-HPL). However, WRC also noted that the proposed continuation of stock grazing within the solar farm may reduce the extent of that loss by enabling an ongoing productive use of the land.

29. We have considered these matters in Table A. While the project's use of highly productive land is relevant to your consideration of whether to decline the application, we do not recommend that you decline the application on this basis. The extent of any loss of highly productive land, the proposed continuation of stock grazing, and the project's consistency with the NPS-HPL are matters that can be considered in greater detail by the expert panel at the substantive application stage, should the project be referred.

**Reasons to accept**

30. The statutory framework in Appendix 1 sets out the reasons you can accept a project for referral.

31. Our assessment of these matters is summarised in Table A. We consider the project meets the requirements of section 22, as:

    a. it is an infrastructure project involving the construction, operation and maintenance of a utility-scale solar farm, battery energy storage system and associated electricity transmission infrastructure

    b. it would have significant regional or national benefits because it would increase renewable electricity generation capacity, contribute to New Zealand's electricity supply and energy security, support climate change mitigation through renewable electricity generation, and provide economic and employment benefits

c. referring the project to the fast-track approvals process would facilitate the project, including by enabling the multiple approvals required for the project to be considered through a single process that is more timely and cost-effective than standard consenting pathways

d. it is unlikely to materially affect the efficient operation of the fast-track approvals process, because the project is neither novel in the New Zealand context nor beyond the scope of what an expert panel would typically assess.

32. If you do not agree, you must decline the referral application under section 21(3)(a) of the Act.

**Other matters**

33. We have identified two issues further to the matters identified above and our analysis of these is in Table A.

34. The applicant has not included an application for an approval under the Wildlife Act 1953 as part of the approvals sought for the project. DOC considers that additional approvals under the Wildlife Act 1953 are likely to be required in relation to potential effects on protected wildlife, including long-tailed and central lesser short-tailed bats and Threatened and At-Risk bird species, and for proposed carcass monitoring. WRC also identified potential effects on indigenous fauna, including bats, birds and lizards, and sought further information and management measures as part of any substantive application.

35. The applicant's ecological assessments identify potential effects on indigenous birds and potential lizard habitat, although no lizards were detected during surveys and the likelihood of their presence is considered low. The bat assessment identifies the proposed removal of approximately 6.2 km of mature woody vegetation and shelterbelts and assesses the magnitude of effects on long-tailed bats prior to mitigation as High. Management and mitigation measures are proposed, and in response to requests for clarification the applicant has confirmed that any required Wildlife Act approval would be sought separately from the fast-track process.

36. We do not consider the potential requirement for a separate Wildlife Act approval alters our recommendation to refer the project. Any requirement for such an approval would need to be addressed by the applicant separately from the fast-track approvals process.

37. The application identifies 28 contamination features within the project area, including three contaminated soil areas requiring remediation and management. WRC noted that the Preliminary Site Investigation, Detailed Site Investigation and Contaminated Soils Management and Remediation Plan referred to in the application were not provided with the referral application. WRC requested that these documents, together with identification and mapping of contaminated areas, an assessment of potential effects on groundwater, surface water and receiving environments, proposed remediation and contaminated soil management measures, and associated handling, control and verification procedures, be provided as part of any substantive application.

38. We do not consider the contaminated land matters identified above alter our recommendation to refer the project and we note that the additional information requested by WRC is likely to be required under Schedule 3 of the Act without a specific direction from you under section 27.

## Conclusions

39. We consider the project meets the section 22 criteria and you could accept the referral application under section 21 of the Act and refer the project to the fast-track approvals process with the specifications outlined below.

40. We consider that if you decide to refer the project, you should specify under section 27 of the Act the following requirements that should apply to the project:

    a. the deadline for lodging the substantive application is two years from the date of the referral notice of decisions letter to the applicant; and

    b. the information that must be submitted with the substantive application;

        i. an Integrated Transport Assessment addressing the construction and operational transport effects of the project, including its interfaces with State Highway 32 and proposed access and intersection arrangements.

    c. Transpower and NZTA as persons or groups from whom a panel must invite comments, in addition to those specified in section 53 of the Act

41. The above restrictions are required for the following reasons:

    a. The information specified in paragraph 40(b) is required to ensure that the panel has sufficient information to assess the potential transport and access effects associated with the project.

## Next steps

42. The Secretary for the Environment (the Secretary) must give notice of your decisions on the referral application, and the reasons for them, to the applicant(s) and anyone invited to comment under section 17 and publish the notice on the Fast-track website.

43. In your notice of decisions, you must direct a panel considering any substantive application for the project to comply with the requirements identified under section 16(2)(c) of the Act relating to:

    a. the relevant procedural arrangements under the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 concerning notification to Te Kōpua Kānapanapa, the appointment of hearing commissioners, and consideration of Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki; and

    b. the relevant requirements of the JMA between Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board and TDC, including the procedural requirements relating to the option for joint decision-making.

44. If you decide to refer the project, the Secretary must also give notice of your decision to:

    a. the panel convener

    b. any additional iwi authorities or Treaty settlement entities that you consider have an interest in the matter other than those invited to comment under section 17

    c. the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA)

    d. the relevant administering agencies

45. You must also provide all of the information you received that relates to this application to the EPA and the panel convener, including:

    a. the referral application

b. any comments received under section 17

c. the report obtained under section 18

d. if a report was obtained under section 19, that report.

46. We will undertake this action on your behalf.

47. We have attached a notice of decisions letter to the applicant(s) based on our recommendations (refer Appendix 7) and we will provide it to all relevant parties. We will provide you with an amended letter if required.

48. Our recommendations for your decisions follow.

## Recommendations

49. We recommend that you:

a. **Note** section 21(3) of the Fast-track Approvals Act 2024 (the Act) requires you to decline the referral application from Meridian Energy Limited (the applicant) if you are satisfied that the project involves an ineligible activity, or you consider that you do not have adequate information to inform the decision under this section or if you are not satisfied that the Western Bays Solar Farm project (the project) meets the referral criteria in section 22 of the Act.

Noted

b. **Agree** that before deciding on the application for project referral under section 21(1) of the Act you have considered:

i. the application in Appendix 2

ii. the report obtained under section 18 in Appendix 4

iii. any comments and further information sought under sections 17 and 20 and provided within the required timeframe in Appendices 5 and 6.

Yes / No

c. **Note** the application under section 16 of:

i. relevant Treaty settlements, including the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018; and

ii. the joint management agreement between Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board and Taupō District Council.

Noted

d. **Note** that this provides for the consideration of:

i. notification to Te Kōpua Kānapanapa, the appointment of hearing commissioners, and consideration of Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki; and

ii. the joint decision-making arrangements under the joint management agreement between Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board and Taupō District Council.

Noted

e. **Agree** you are satisfied the project will meet the referral criteria in section 22 of the Act as:

i. it is a is an infrastructure project that would have significant regional or national benefits because it would deliver new renewable electricity generation and transmission infrastructure, comprising up to 420 megawatts (MW) of solar generation, approximately 250 MW / 2,000 megawatt-hours of battery storage, a new transmission line and connection to the National Grid;

ii. it would deliver significant economic benefits, including an estimated capital investment of approximately $758 million and employment during construction and operation; and

iii. it would support climate change mitigation through substantial additional renewable electricity generation and battery storage capacity, reducing reliance on higher-emissions generation and supporting electrification of the economy; and

iv. it would support climate change adaptation and resilience by increasing the diversity, reliability and resilience of New Zealand's electricity system through additional renewable generation and large-scale battery storage capacity.

v. referring the project to the fast-track approvals process would facilitate the project, including by enabling it to be processed in a more timely and cost-effective way than under normal processes because it precludes public and limited notification and appeals under the Act are to the High Court and limited to points of law; and

vi. referring the project is unlikely to materially affect the efficient operation of the fast-track approvals process because the project is neither novel in the New Zealand context nor beyond the scope of what a panel would typically assess under the RMA.

Yes / No

f. **Agree** there is no reason the project must be declined under section 21(3)

Yes / No

g. **Note** the project will occur on identified Māori Land, but the landowner has provided written approval so no ineligible activity is triggered under section 5(1)(a)

Noted

h. **Agree** to accept the referral application under section 21(1) and refer the whole project to the fast-track approvals process under section 26(2).

Yes / No

i. **Agree** to specify Meridian Energy Limited as the person authorised to lodge a substantive application for the project

Yes / No

j. **Agree** to direct a panel to comply with the following matters under section 16:

i. the relevant procedural arrangements under the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 relating to notification to Te Kōpua Kānapanapa, the appointment of hearing commissioners, and consideration of Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki; and

ii. the relevant procedural requirements of the joint management agreement between Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board and Taupō District Council relating to joint decision-making.

Yes / No

k. **Agree** to specify under section 27(3)(b) of the Act:

i. the deadline for lodging the application two years from the date of the referral notice of decisions letter to the applicant;

ii. the following information that the applicant must submit with the substantive application:

(1) an Integrated Transport Assessment addressing the construction and operational transport effects of the project, including its interface with State Highway 32 and proposed access and intersection arrangements.

iii. the following persons or groups from whom a panel must invite comments in addition to those specified in section 53:

(1) Transpower New Zealand Limited; and

(2) New Zealand Transport Agency Waka Kotahi

Yes / No

l. **Agree** that the Secretary for the Environment will provide your notice of decisions to:

i. Anyone invited to comment on the application including local authorities and relevant Māori groups

ii. the panel convener

iii. The Environmental Protection Authority (EPA)

iv. The following relevant administering agencies:

1. Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga

Yes / No

m. **Note** that you **may** decline a referral application for any other reason, whether or not the project meets the criteria in section 22, including (but not limited to) the reasons for decline set out at section 21(5).

Noted

n. **Approve** the draft notice of decisions letter to the applicant (attached in Appendix 7).

Yes / No

o. **Note** that should you decide to accept the referral application, our recommendations for appropriate directions to a panel (relating to consultation) and the applicant (relating to information to be supplied with the substantive application) are included in Table A.

Noted

## Signatures



Stephanie Frame
**Manager – Fast-track Operations**

Hon Chris Bishop
**Minister for Infrastructure**

Date:

## Table A: Stage 2 analysis

<table>
<tr><td>Recommendation</td><td colspan="3">Accept the referral application and refer the project to the fast-track approvals process</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Project details</td><td>Project Name</td><td>Applicant</td><td>Project Location</td></tr>
<tr><td>Western Bays Solar Farm</td><td>Meridian Energy Limited</td><td>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="3">The project is the construction, operation and maintenance of a solar farm and battery energy storage system occupying approximately 620 hectares (ha), together with a transmission line, substation, Grid Injection Point and ancillary buildings and infrastructure, near Kuratau in the Waikato region, and includes:<br><br>• a solar farm with a generation capacity of up to 420 megawatts (MW), including solar photovoltaic panels, inverters, power conversion and storage blocks incorporating battery energy storage systems (BESS), with an aggregated storage capacity of approximately 250 MW, for the storage and supply of electricity to support grid stability and security of supply and associated electrical infrastructure;<br>• a 33 kilovolt (kV) underground electricity network, and a 33/220 kV onsite substation, together with operational facilities, buildings, perimeter fencing and mitigation planting;<br>• stock grazing beneath the solar panels;<br>• a 220 kV double-circuit transmission line approximately 9.7 km in length, supported by towers up to 60 m high, connecting the solar farm substation to the Grid Injection Point;<br>• a 220 kV Grid Injection Point connecting the project to the National Grid Bunnythorpe-Whakamaru A and B 220 kV transmission lines;<br>• associated construction activities, including earthworks, discharges, vegetation clearance, laydown areas, access works, access tracks, road widening and supporting infrastructure; and<br>• groundwater take and use from an existing bore during construction and operation.<br><br>The project seeks all necessary approvals and will require:<br><br>• resource consents and certificates of compliance under the Resource Management Act 1991; and<br>• an archaeological authority under the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Minister invites comments / requests information</td><td colspan="3">Comments from invited parties<br><br>Local authorities<br>Waikato Regional Council (WRC)- advised that it is not aware of any competing applications and does not consider the project involves an ineligible activity or that any reasons for declining referral apply. WRC generally agrees with the resource consents identified by the applicant and considers that a number of matters can be further addressed through the AEE and supporting information at the substantive application stage.<br>WRC identified the following matters for further consideration as part of any substantive application:<br>• Highly productive land: a Land Use Capability Assessment was not provided. Much of the site is LUC Class 3 land, and WRC considers the application should address the National Policy Statement for Highly Productive Land 2022 (NPS-HPL), including the functional or operational need for the development to locate on highly productive land.<br>• Ecology and wetlands: further information should be provided on the three identified wetlands, including their ecological value, changes to water flows and measures to protect them. WRC also sought further assessment and management measures for bats, birds and lizards, vegetation clearance, and pest and weed management, including post-installation bird and bat carcass monitoring.<br>• Groundwater: the application does not identify the maximum daily and annual water volumes required, and WRC recommends that water requirements for construction and operation be assessed to support the proposed groundwater take.<br>• Contaminated land: the Primary Site Investigation, Detailed Site Investigation and Contaminated Soils Management and Remediation Plan referred to in the application were not provided. WRC considers these, together with mapping of contaminated areas and HAIL features and appropriate assessment, remediation, management and verification measures, should accompany the substantive application.<br>• Land Improvement Agreement: WRC advised that its Taupō office should be consulted on proposed tree removal and replanting, with details of that consultation provided with the substantive application.<br>WRC also requested that the substantive application confirm the exact consents sought and include conditions commensurate with the effects of the activities for which consent is sought.<br><br>We note that the information identified by WRC is information that would ordinarily be expected to be provided as part of a substantive application.<br><br>Taupo District Council- confirmed that there were no competing applications for the project area and provided no further comments on the application.<br><br>Ministers<br>Minister for Energy - considers the project will deliver new regionally or nationally significant infrastructure in the form of large-scale energy generation. He notes that demand for electricity is expected to increase, that the project would be a significant contribution to New Zealand's energy system, and that the proposed battery storage would significantly increase the energy system benefits of the solar generation.</td></tr>
</table>

**Minister for Economic Growth** - considers that the proposal appears likely to have significant national economic benefits, particularly through the scale of investment, additional renewable generation and battery storage, and its potential contribution to electricity security and resilience. The Minister also considers the project may provide significant but time-limited regional benefits through construction activity and direct employment

**Minister for Regional Development -**considers that the project may be regionally significant and states that its stronger significance is its contribution to regionally and nationally significant infrastructure, which may support economic activity by increasing electricity supply, storage, resilience and affordability. The Minister also notes a potentially significant district-level employment benefit but a modest regional impact.

**Minister for Māori Development and Minister for Māori Crown Relations** - support the application progressing and encourage the applicant and the panel to have due regard to relevant Treaty settlement legislation and instruments and any feedback received from relevant Māori groups, as set out in the Treaty settlements and other obligations (Section 18) report.

**Minister for the Environment** - did not wish to provide comments on the application.

**Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage** - provided no comments on the application

**Māori Groups**

No responses were received to the invitations to comment.

**Administering agency**

Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga (HNZPT) - advises that the applicant has provided an archaeological assessment that does not identify any recorded archaeological sites within the project area and identifies very low potential for unrecorded archaeological sites to be affected by the proposal. HNZPT states that the applicant has demonstrated a very small risk of adverse effects on unrecorded archaeological sites.
They note that:

- the project area is of significance to Te Kotahitanga ko Ngāti Tuwharetoa, Ngāti Parekaawa, Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board, Ngāti Te Maunga and Ngāti Raukawa due to the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 and the Raukawa Claims Settlement Act 2014
- no Cultural Impact Assessment was provided with the application. However, the application states that Ngāti Parekaawa cultural advisers have authored a Cultural Impact Assessment which has been reviewed by the hapū and Meridian and have supported the archaeological and other effects assessments.

HNZPT anticipates further engagement with the applicant if the project is referred to ensure all relevant documentation is provided with a substantive application for an authority, including evidence of appropriate consultation with tangata whenua and appropriate draft conditions.

**Owners of Māori land in the project area**
While the owners of Māori land within the project area did not respond to the invitation to comment, the Proprietors of Hauhungaroa 1D3B separately provided a letter confirming agreement in principle to grant easement and lease rights to facilitate the transmission line and grid injection point.

**Any other persons or groups**

**Transpower New Zealand Limited (Transpower)** - supports the development of new generation and storage capacity and is continuing to work with the applicant on the Grid Injection Point. Transpower identified matters relating to the protection and operation of the National Grid, including electrical safe distances, access to transmission infrastructure, and planting near the Bunnythorpe-Whakamaru A and B 220 kV lines. Transpower expects these matters to be addressed through the substantive application and associated conditions and requested the opportunity to comment on the substantive application

**New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA)-**stated that they have been engaging with the applicant regarding access from State Highway 32. NZTA identified required intersection and access upgrades and associated traffic management, safety and statutory access processes, but considers these matters can be addressed through conditions, advice notes and subsequent approvals. NZTA does not consider these matters prevent the project proceeding to the substantive stage and has no concerns with referral

**Department of Conservation (DOC)** - advised that further information was required to determine whether qualifying water bodies or marginal strips were present on land subject to Part IVA of the Conservation Act 1987. DOC also considers that, without appropriate mitigation, the project could result in significant adverse effects on Threatened and At-Risk bird and bat species, although these effects may be able to be managed through appropriate design and conditions. DOC considers that additional approvals under the Wildlife Act 1953 are likely to be required and did not identify any other reason the project should not be referred.

**Further information from applicant**

You sought further information regarding streams, tributaries, wetlands and potential marginal strips within the project area from the applicant. This followed comments from DOC regarding uncertainty as to whether qualifying water bodies and marginal strips may be present on land subject to Part IVA of the Conservation Act 1987, comments from WRC regarding wetlands within the project area, and matters identified through the section 18 report relating to freshwater features within the Taupō Catchment, including the Orongopioi Stream and the potential relevance of Treaty settlement and catchment management arrangements.

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| | You requested mapping and supporting information to identify all streams, tributaries and wetlands on land parcels subject to Part IVA of the Conservation Act 1987, confirmation of whether any marginal strips are present, details of their location, extent and legal status, and an assessment of whether any Conservation Act approvals would be required if those areas were affected by the project.<br><br>In response, the applicant provided additional mapping and assessment information identifying streams, tributaries, wetlands and qualifying water bodies within the project area, confirmed the location and extent of any marginal strips, and assessed whether the proposed project would affect those areas and require approvals under the Conservation Act 1987. The applicant concluded no such approvals are required. |
| **The Minister must decline an application if the Minister is satisfied that the project involves an ineligible activity [section 21(3)(b)]** | We consider you can be satisfied that the project does not involve an ineligible activity because it:<br>– would not occur on identified Māori land, Māori customary land or a Māori reservation without the written approval of the landowner as confirmed by the applicant's assessment and supporting land ownership information, noting that while the project includes the construction of electricity infrastructure on identified Māori land (Māori freehold land), the applicant has provided evidence of written agreement from the relevant landowners (the Proprietors of Hauhungaroa 1D3B), meaning the activity is not an ineligible activity under section 5(1)(a) of the Act and a determination under section 23 is not required<br>– would not occur in a customary marine title area or protected customary rights area as it is not in the coastal marine area and has not appeared in our check of agreed CMT<br>– is not an aquaculture activity or activity that is incompatible with aquaculture activities that would occur in an aquaculture settlement area and for which the applicant is not authorised to apply for a coastal permit because it will not occur in the CMA, will not occur in an aquaculture settlement area<br>– would not require an access arrangement which cannot be granted under the Crown Minerals Act (including s61(1A)) because it does not include an access arrangement, would not occur on Schedule 4 land<br>– would not be prevented by section 165J, M, Q, ZC or ZDB of the RMA because it will not occur in the CMA<br>– would not occur on Schedule 4 land as confirmed by the records of title<br>– would not occur on a national reserve as confirmed by the records of title<br>– would not occur on a reserve held under the Reserves Act 1977 that is managed by or vested in someone other than the Crown or a local authority and that person has not consented in writing as confirmed by the record of title, applicant's evidence of consultation etc<br>– is not a prohibited activity or decommissioning activity under the EEZA, 15B or 15C of the as the project does not involve activities in the exclusive economic zone or continental shelf area, marine dumping, or offshore decommissioning activities.<br>– is not for the purpose of an offshore renewable energy project. because it will not occur offshore/involve renewable energy production<br><br>No comments raised by parties invited to comment have indicated that the project would be ineligible for referral. |
| **The Minister must decline an application if the Minister considers they do not have adequate information to inform the decision [section 21(3)(c)]** | We consider that the Minister has adequate information to inform the referral decision. |
| **Relevant considerations and procedural requirements in Treaty settlement, Mana Whakahono ā Rohe, joint management agreement, or the Marine and Coastal Area (Takutai Moana) Act 2011 or the Ngā Rohe Moana o Ngā Hapū o Ngāti Porou Act 2019 [section 16]** | The section 18 report identifies relevant procedural requirements arising from the Ngāti Tūwharetoa Claims Settlement Act 2018 and the 2009 joint management agreement between Tūwharetoa Māori Trust Board and Taupō District Council. These include requirements relating to notification to Te Kōpua Kānapanapa, the appointment of hearing commissioners and consideration of Te Kaupapa Kaitiaki, and procedural requirements relating to the option for joint decision-making under the joint management agreement.<br>We consider these requirements can be addressed by directing any panel considering a substantive application to comply with the relevant procedural requirements identified in the section 18 report. |
| **Section 22 assessment criteria** | |
| **The project is an infrastructure or development project that would have significant regional or national benefits [section 22(1)(a)]** | *The Minister must consider a relevant Government policy statement (GPS) [s22(1A)]*<br>The only current GPS is the Government Policy Statement on Grocery Competition. As this project does not involve a supermarket development or grocery-related activities, there is no GPS relevant to your decision.<br><br>The Minister may consider any of the following matters, or any other matters the Minister considers relevant:<br><br>*Will deliver new regionally or nationally significant infrastructure or enable the continued functioning of existing regionally or nationally significant infrastructure [s22(2)(a)(ii)]*<br>The applicant stated that the project is a nationally significant renewable electricity generation project that would:<br>• 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;<br>• contribute to meeting forecast increases in electricity demand and support electrification of transport, industry and other sectors; and<br>• deliver significant national and regional benefits through renewable electricity generation, battery storage capacity and electricity system resilience. |

The Minister for Energy considered the project will deliver new regionally or nationally significant infrastructure in the form of large-scale renewable electricity generation and noted its contribution to electricity supply and the benefits of battery storage. The Minister for Regional Development considered the project's strongest significance to be its contribution to regionally and nationally significant infrastructure through increased electricity supply, storage, resilience and affordability.

We consider the project would deliver new regionally and nationally significant electricity infrastructure and make a substantial contribution to New Zealand's electricity generation, storage and transmission network.
We consider the project **meets** this criterion and you could refer it on this basis.

*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.

The Minister for Economic Growth considered the proposal appears likely to provide significant national economic benefits through the scale of investment, additional renewable generation and battery storage, and its contribution to electricity security and resilience. The Minister also considered the project may provide significant, but time-limited, regional benefits through construction activity and direct employment.

The Minister for Regional Development considered the project may provide significant district-level employment benefits but regarded its strongest significance as its contribution to regionally and nationally significant electricity infrastructure, with a more modest regional economic impact.

We consider the project would deliver significant economic benefits through substantial capital investment, employment opportunities during construction and operation, support for regional businesses, and contributions to electricity supply and resilience.
We consider the project **meets** this criterion and you could refer it on this basis.

*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.

While the project would utilise solar energy derived from sunlight, we consider the project's primary significance lies in the delivery of renewable electricity infrastructure and generation capacity rather than the development of a natural resource in the sense contemplated by this criterion.
We **do not** recommend referral on this basis.

*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 renewable electricity, 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.

The Minister for Energy noted that demand for electricity is expected to increase and considered the project would deliver large-scale renewable electricity generation and battery storage infrastructure. The Minister also considered the project would make a significant contribution to New Zealand's energy system.
The Minister for Economic Growth considered that the project would provide benefits through additional renewable generation and battery storage and contribute to electricity security and resilience.
The Minister for Regional Development considered that the project's strongest significance is its contribution to electricity supply, storage, resilience and affordability through regionally and nationally significant infrastructure.
We consider the project would support climate change mitigation through the generation of substantial additional renewable electricity and battery storage capacity, reducing reliance on higher-emissions generation and supporting electrification of the economy.
We consider the project meets this criterion and you could refer it on this basis.

*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 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.

The Minister for Energy noted that electricity demand is expected to increase and considered the project would make a significant contribution to New Zealand's electricity system through large-scale renewable generation and battery storage. The Minister for Economic Growth also considered the project would contribute to electricity security and resilience through additional renewable generation and battery storage capacity.

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| | The Minister for Regional Development considered the project's strongest significance to be its contribution to electricity supply, storage, resilience and affordability through regionally and nationally significant infrastructure.<br>We consider the project would support climate change adaptation and resilience by increasing the diversity, reliability and resilience of New Zealand's electricity system through additional renewable generation and large-scale battery storage capacity. The battery energy storage system would enhance the ability of the electricity system to respond to fluctuations in supply and demand and support continuity of supply during disruptions.<br>We consider the project **meets** this criterion and you could refer it on this basis.<br><br>*Will address significant environmental issues [s22(2)(a)(ix)]*<br>The applicant stated that the project would:<br>• provide a meaningful increase in renewable electricity generation.<br>• support reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.<br>• contribute to New Zealand's response to climate change through decarbonisation of the electricity sector.<br>The Minister for Energy considered the project would deliver large-scale renewable electricity generation and battery storage infrastructure that would make a significant contribution to New Zealand's energy system. The Minister for Economic Growth also considered the project would provide benefits through additional renewable generation and battery storage, while the Minister for Regional Development noted the project's contribution to electricity supply, storage, resilience and affordability.<br>We note that the project's environmental benefits principally relate to climate change mitigation through the generation and storage of renewable electricity. The project does not appear to be primarily directed at addressing a specific environmental issue in the manner contemplated by this criterion. Rather, its environmental benefits are more appropriately considered under the climate change mitigation criterion.<br>We **do not** recommend referral on this basis.<br><br>*Is consistent with local or regional planning documents, including spatial strategies [s22(2)(a)(x)]*<br>The applicant identified consistency with:<br>• New Zealand's Emissions Reduction Plans, including support for national climate change mitigation and electrification objectives;<br>• the National Policy Statement for Renewable Electricity Generation 2011 (as amended in December 2025), which recognises the national significance of increasing renewable electricity generation;<br>• 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<br>• 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.<br><br>WRC did not identify any fundamental inconsistency between the project and the planning framework. However, it noted that much of the site is located on LUC Class 3 land and advised that any substantive application should include an assessment against the NPS-HPL, including consideration of whether the project has a functional or operational need to locate on highly productive land. WRC also identified a number of matters requiring further assessment through the substantive application process, including ecological, wetland, groundwater, earthworks and contaminated land matter.<br>While there is no evidence before us that the project is fundamentally inconsistent with the relevant planning framework, the extent to which the project is consistent with all relevant planning documents, including the NPS-HPL and the regional and district planning framework, is unclear.<br>We **do not** recommend referral on this basis. |
| **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)]*<br>The applicant stated that referral of the project to the fast-track approvals process would:<br>• 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;<br>• 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;<br>• 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;<br>• 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<br>• move efficiency and cost-effectiveness through a "one stop shop" approach, including obtaining the Archaeological Authority as part of the fast-track process.<br>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."<br><br>We agree that referring the project to the fast-track approvals process would facilitate the project, including by enabling it to be processed in a more timely and cost-effective way than under normal processes. We note, however, that the applicant has not included an approval under the Wildlife Act 1953, which may be required in relation to protected wildlife, including bats, birds and lizards, and would be sought separately if required. This may limit some of the efficiencies associated with the "one stop shop" approach identified by the applicant but does not alter our overall assessment.<br><br>*Is unlikely to materially affect the efficient operation of the fast-track approvals process [s22(1)(b)(ii)]*<br>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.<br>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.<br>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. |

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| | We agree that referring the project is unlikely to materially affect the efficient operation of the fast-track approvals process. |
| **Reasons to decline** | |
| **Minister must decline [section 21(3)]** | *The Minister must decline a referral application if:*<br><br>*The application may not be accepted under subsection 1 (meets referral criteria)*<br>We consider that the application may be accepted under subsection (1), as the project meets the referral criteria in section 22<br><br>*The Minister is satisfied the project involves an ineligible activity*<br>We have not identified any ineligible activities associated with the project.<br><br>*The Minister considers that they do not have adequate information to inform the decision under this section*<br>We consider that there is adequate information available to inform your decision on the referral application. While some matters will require further information at the substantive application stage, these do not prevent you from making a referral decision<br><br>We do not consider that you must decline the application under this section. |
| **Minister may decline [section 21(4) and 21(5)(a-h)]** | *The Minister may decline a referral application for any other reason, whether or not it meets the criteria in section 22.*<br>*Reasons to decline a referral application under subsection 4 include, without limitation:*<br><br>*The project would be inconsistent with a Treaty settlement, Ngā Rohe Moana o Ngā Hapū o Ngāti Porou Act 2019, Marine and Coastal Area (Takutai Moana) Act 2011, a Mana Whakahono ā Rohe, or a joint management agreement*<br>We have not identified any inconsistency with these arrangements that would warrant declining the referral application.<br><br>*It would be more appropriate to deal with the matters that would be authorised by the proposed approvals under another Act or Acts*<br>We have not identified any matters that would be more appropriately dealt with under another Act or Acts.<br><br>*The project may have significant adverse effects on the environment*<br>DOC considers that, without appropriate mitigation, the project would likely result in significant adverse effects, including on threatened and at-risk birds and bats, although appropriate design and conditions may enable these effects to be managed.<br>WRC raised matters relating to potential ecological effects, including wetlands and indigenous fauna, and contaminated land, including 28 identified contamination features and three areas requiring remediation and management. WRC considers these matters require further assessment as part of any substantive application but does not consider that any of the reasons to decline the referral application apply.<br>We consider the adverse effects of the project can be most appropriately tested by an expert panel with the benefit of a full substantive application and do not consider the potential adverse effects identified provide sufficient reason to decline the referral application.<br><br>*The applicant(s) has a poor compliance history under a specified Act that relates to any of the proposed approvals*<br>We have not identified any compliance history that would provide a reason to decline the referral application.<br><br>*The project area includes land that the Minister for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations considers necessary for Treaty settlement purposes*<br>We have not identified any land within the project area that would provide a reason to decline the referral application on this basis.<br><br>*The project includes an activity that is a prohibited activity under the Resource Management Act 1991*<br>We have not identified any prohibited activity under the RMA.<br><br>*A substantive application for the project would have one or more competing applications.*<br>We have not identified any competing applications for the project.<br><br>*In relation to any proposed approval of the kind described in section 42(4)(a) (resource consents), there are one or more existing resource consents of the kind referred to in section 30(3)(a)*<br>The applicant has identified an existing resource consent for groundwater take associated with the site and related to the previous farming operation. We do not consider this provides a reason to decline the referral application. |

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| | *Any other matter*<br>DOC considers that additional approvals under the Wildlife Act 1953 are likely to be required. The applicant has not included a Wildlife Act approval in the approvals sought and has stated that any approval required would be sought separately. We do not consider this provides a reason to decline the referral application<br><br>We do not recommend you decline the application |

# 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 section 22
    b. you are satisfied the project involves an ineligible activity (section 5)
    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 section 21(5) and even if the application meets the section 22 referral criteria.
5. You can decline an application before or after inviting comments under section 17(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 the 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.