

By BEN HEATHER in Queenstown - The Southland Times | Tuesday, 17 February 2009

Meridian money 'gags' dissent

The Department of Conservation was paid \$175,000 by Meridian Energy to drop its opposition to the \$2 billion Project Hayes wind farm.

The department is the third wind farm opponent Meridian Energy has silenced, with Ngai Tahu and the Historic Places Trust both withdrawing their opposition last year following settlements, with the latter including a \$179,000 payment.

Director-general of Conservation Al Morrison said silence was not bought and the agreement was reached after concerns about "localised impacts" were addressed.

"DOC ... often enters into negotiations with developers to ensure localised impacts on birds or plants can be addressed," he said.

"If we can get compensation to help settle these issues we will."

The agreement, tabled as evidence in the Environment Court in Queenstown last week, included Meridian agreeing to monitor birds killed by turbines and turn the carcasses over to the department.

The \$175,000 is earmarked to improve public access to the Rock and Pillar Conservation Area and research the decline of the eastern falcon.

But while fears of dead birds may have been resolved, the department's biggest concerns were never raised, because they would have contradicted the Government's pro-Hayes submission.

Department Otago Conservator Jeff Connell confirmed on Wednesday that a landscape assessment was not submitted because it would have forced the department to reject Project Hayes outright.

Instead they stuck to issues of birds, trout and fire plans, for which concessions could be made.

Department spokesperson Rory Newsam said the department was allowed to raise only local concerns in its submission, and landscape issues were not deemed local.

Historic Places Trust chief executive Bruce Chapman said its deal was not secret and was agreed upon to gain the best outcome for heritage values.

Ngai Tahu would not say how much money was involved in their deal with Meridian.

Upland Landscape Protection society legal organiser Ewan Carr said the department had been gagged by both the Government and Meridian.

"It not about money, it is about the principle," he said.

"The department should be a check and balance. Instead they are a pawn in lessening the public's perception of the risk (of Project Hayes)."

The society is one of several groups still fighting the Central Otago wind farm in the Environment Court in Queenstown.

Mr Carr said Meridian had resorted to "chequebook justice", buying out the well-resourced opponents and leaving smaller community groups to battle it alone.

Meanwhile, Meridian has announced it will increase its power prices from March 15.

Southland's 2000 Meridian customers, Central Otago's 1000 and Otago's 1000 will pay 5.8 per cent more on average for their power.