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Sent via email to individual email addresses.

Tuesday 24th January, 2023

Tēnā koe

The proposed international jet airport at Tarras, Central Otago

We are writing to you as a decision maker or key stakeholder in the proposed new international airport at Tarras, Central Otago, New Zealand.

This letter represents the views of some of New Zealand's most experienced researchers with expertise in the fields of business, economics, climate science, sustainability, Māori and indigenous studies, tourism, the environment, agriculture, and policy studies.

It is the shared view of the undersigned that the proposed Tarras Airport should not proceed.

New Zealand has committed to substantially reducing its carbon emissions. It is increasingly clear that there will be significant environmental, social, cultural and economic as well as political and reputational consequences if we fail to do so. Government and most councils, including Christchurch City Council and Central Otago District Council, have declared climate emergencies. It is already proving difficult to reduce carbon emissions. Government is asking others - such as the farming sector, the public sector and the energy sector - to take urgent and major steps to curb emissions.

We are concerned that any organisation, let alone Christchurch International Airport Ltd which is owned 25% by the government and 75% by Christchurch City Council, would consider building a new airport in New Zealand during a climate emergency. This proposed airport highlights the need for more climate-focussed legislative and regulatory frameworks as a basis for stronger controls for approving major infrastructure projects such as new international airports.

It is now widely accepted that the New Zealand tourism industry must move away from the volume-based high growth approach that underpins the Tarras Airport proposal. The future of tourism will be less volume driven, and more focussed on quality and value through extended length of stay, high value, deep engagement and high quality local/regional visitor experiences. These principles are outlined in the Queenstown Lakes and Central Otago destination management plans.

This approach is also consistent with the Climate Change Commission encouraging everyone to reduce their personal carbon emissions through behavioural changes. Encouraging both New Zealanders and visitors to New Zealand to fly less is an important behaviour change which will reduce emissions significantly; developing a new airport in Central Otago will have the opposite effect.

Currently 12% of New Zealand's gross CO₂ emissions come from aviation.¹ We are the sixth highest emitter of aviation emissions per capita in the world.² Under current technologies high personal aeromobility is incompatible with the government's emissions mitigation goals. It has been confirmed that the proposed new Central Otago airport will be built for long-haul wide-bodied jets; an airport designed to stimulate demand and

¹ As of 2019, including international transport. "As borders open and international travel resumes, will New Zealand's sky-high aviation emissions take off again?", The Conversation, March 29, 2022 ([link](#))

² As above.

easily expand its capacity further in the future. This approach is fundamentally at odds with the urgent need to halve carbon emissions by 2030 in accordance with Paris 2015 climate commitments.

Industry talk of “decarbonising aviation” in effect kicks the net-zero emissions can down the road to 2050, which is still nearly three decades away. This approach is not sufficiently ambitious within the context of the call for urgent decarbonisation over the six years, 179 days (at the time of writing)³ remaining to halve gross global carbon emissions and remain within the carbon budget for well below +2.0°C (it is widely accepted that there is now no credible path to achieving the +1.5°C target).

Furthermore the promise of zero carbon aviation is based on technologies that do not yet exist. They do not yet exist because of the enormous technical challenges associated with decarbonising global and national aviation systems. These challenges have been well documented by commentators, academics, the media and indeed aviation industry leaders.⁴ Advancing technical solutions is a major priority, but this should not be confused with decarbonisation pledges that are based on technologies that do not exist.

In 2021, New Zealand was a founding member of the “International Aviation Climate Ambition Coalition”, committing to preparing a plan detailing “ambitious and concrete national action to reduce aviation emissions”. This initiative has now led to the UN declaring a goal of net zero aviation by 2050. Building a new airport catering to conventional wide-body jet aircraft would fatally undermine this goal.

While climate action and carbon emissions are central to this discussion, our concerns also extend to the potential impact of this proposed airport on Central Otago’s environment, flora and fauna, strain on regional infrastructure, impact on local and regional communities, wider economic consequences, intergenerational impacts and the wellbeing of those living locally.

We are not anti-airport, anti-aviation, anti-business or anti-development. We understand the need for infrastructure. However, any proposal with widespread social, cultural and environmental impacts requires decision processes that are informed by the very latest research insights.

We therefore urge you in the strongest possible terms to put a stay on the Central Otago Airport proposal.

Nāku noa, nā

Professor Jonathan Boston
Professor James Higham
Professor Bronwyn Hayward
Professor Shaun Hendy
Distinguished Professor Robert McLachlan
Professor Ilan Noy

Professor Steven Ratuva
Professor James Renwick
Distinguished Professor Dame Anne Salmond
Professor Huhana Smith
Professor Anita Wreford

*further details about signatories on following page

P.S. In the next few weeks we will compile an easy reference list of relevant research papers covering many of the issues referenced above, and more. This will by no means be an exhaustive list, but it will serve as a comprehensive starting point. We will let you know when it has been compiled and published.

³ Calculated as at noon, 24 January 2023, using the countdown clock [here](#)

⁴ We are happy to provide a list of recent references should you need them, but please also refer to: “Airbus boss warns of delay in decarbonising airline industry” The Guardian (30 November 2022, [here](#)) in which the CEO of Airbus is quoted as saying: “Ambition is not yet matched by action. [...] I believe it is difficult to overstate the scale of the energy challenge.”

Further detail about the signatories.

Professor Jonathon Boston ONZM	Emeritus Professor of Public Policy, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington.
Professor James Higham	Professor of Sustainable Tourism, Department of Tourism, University of Otago
Professor Bronwyn Hayward MNZM	Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Canterbury. Director of The Sustainable Citizenship and Civic Imagination Research Group, University of Canterbury.
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Distinguished Professor Robert McLachlan FRSNZ	School of Mathematical and Computational Sciences, Massey University
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Distinguished Professor Dame Anne Salmond, ONZ, DBE	Distinguished Professor of Maori Studies, University of Auckland
Professor Huhana Smith	Head of Whiti o Rehua School of Art – Fine Art, Māori Visual Arts and Photography, Massey University. Co-Chair Climate Change Joint Action Committee – Horizons Regional Council, Palmerston North
Professor Anita Wreford	Agribusiness & Economics Research Unit, Lincoln University

List of recipients of this letter

- Hon. Chris Hipkins (as incoming Prime Minister) and Hon. Carmel Sepuloni (as incoming Deputy PM) - to share with relevant cabinet ministers once new appointments confirmed
- Christchurch City Council Mayor, Councillors, Community Board Members and Execs
- Christchurch International Airport Ltd board members and executive
- Christchurch City Holdings Limited board members and executive
- Central Otago District Council councillors, Community Board Members, Executive
- Otago Regional Councillors