

Helios Hearing August 2025 – Amie Pont

Kia ora koutou Commissioners.

Ko Taiari Plains tōku turangawaiwai,

Ko Mānīatoto e noho ana ahau.

I have left my footprints on the Taiari Plains.

The Mānīatoto is where I sit now.

Ko Amie Pont ahau. My name is Amie Pont.

I have lived in the Mānīatoto for over 20 years and have been heavily involved in this community the entire time. Mostly in a volunteer capacity. Happy to live a simple life in a place I would consider one of the most stunning places on the planet. Our World of Difference.

My submission focused on omissions in the application which are concerning and I am here to reiterate some of those points but also to add comment after attending the full day of witness statements yesterday.

I am most certainly not against alternative power generation in Aotearoa New Zealand and this is not a case of not in our back yard. However, I am process driven, transparency focused and believe in quality communication. Looking back, this application has been flawed from the start. Process and timeframes were restrictive from the get go whether it was intentional or not.

When one of the landholders first came into our local radio station back in 2023 to ask me, as a volunteer announcer, to put over the air an invitation to the community to a drop in afternoon regarding a proposed local solar farm, I was delighted at the idea. I am a predominantly positive person and all the possible opportunities for our community came to mind immediately. Potential jobs, growth for local businesses, potential corporate funding, injection into the local economy, the addition of solar to our ever growing local scientific community (I refer to the Naseby Night Sky initiative, the Otago Central Interplanetary cycle trail, the mahi done by Tiaki Mānīatoto with the Spec Creek site etc).

However, now that I think back, a drop in session versus a public meeting seemed rather intentional. The location of the solar farm was not clearly understood, there was no groups formed to discuss the project once the official information was released, our community board members were extremely quiet on the subject (as usual) and our local Council said nothing about it nor planned any community wide discussions. Time went by and next minute any perceived benefit of our landscape being used for alternative power generation was marred with the sudden realisation of the scale of the proposal.

I can say with complete certainty that the majority of the Mānīatoto community did not know that we were looking at over 660ha of land use here. Yes, it was identified yesterday that the actual infrastructure would only take up a fraction of this land area technically but this does not mitigate the visual scale. We did not know that this could lead to more, that the Mānīatoto and surrounds had the potential to become a testing ground for Aotearoa New Zealand's largest solar experiment and that, in the background, other proposals were underway in neighbouring areas such as Poolburn. To conclude from any initial consultation that there was informed support from the community was misleading.

TIME FRAME & AFFECT ON THE COMMUNITY

This scale of consent can affect any community but the short time frame did not give us time to research, prepare, create opportunity (or conjunctive argument) and this has created avoidable angst.

Suitable consultation would have included CODC exploration on how such a substantial project could affect us, the rate payer. While we heard from many witnesses yesterday, they are still employed by Helios. Aside from the expert engaged by the affected landholders (at their expense I presume) where are the independent witnesses speaking on behalf of the community? When the Hayes Wind Project was shelved back in 2012, 6 years after consent was first applied for by Meridian, our community was split and had devastating effects to the point families moved out of the area. These large scale projects are detrimental to the mental health of communities and we need process to mitigate this. We need to trust that our Council and elected members are all over proposals like this. We have members of our community who are 'sick to their stomachs' with worry of what this means for our landscape and our community, we have elderly who have literally said they're glad they'll probably be dead and not have to see this happen.

We were given a very short time frame to submit and then, due to perhaps the misguided presumption of wide community support, Helios were given an extension to consider the surprising amount of submissions. There were also many members of our community who were afraid to put their names to a submission. Living in a sparsely populated rural area means we all work hard to get along as best we can. People did not want to offend or get on the wrong side of either party whether for or against, especially when we have heard of negative behaviour on both sides towards those who voiced an opinion. This was not acceptable but it has been the reality. Also, during the time Helios were given to consider the submissions, our community have become more informed of the project and have had time to develop their views.

Therefore, I hold in my hand a petition ... these may not be submittable as evidence but in just under 2 days an electronic petition had gleaned over 300 names of people opposed to the solar farm and there are still those who have voiced they would like to sign it but are still concerned that they will offend those directly involved. What we can derive from this and to support my point on consultation, if our community had felt supported to share their views honestly we would have over ¼ of the Mānīatoto against this proposal. To me that is extremely concerning.

Current issues sourcing suitable water for Ranfurly township.

The sites underground water source was not discussed at all yesterday. Although many submitters highlighted the concern of toxins leaching into the ground below the site. I presume this will come at the Otago Regional Council consent stage but to me this is too far down the track. If the water source that runs from Aoraki/Mt Cook out to the ocean does in fact run underneath these properties and could be a potential source for Ranfurly and surrounds I would like to see the risk of affecting the quality of that source mitigated. We might not need it now but we might need it in 10, 15 or 20 years. The information provided on what actual toxins are contained in the panels themselves eliminated the key ingredient of cadmium is slightly more reassuring I guess but I'm sure there are still many questions relating to how this project could potentially affect our water resources.

Waste Management- how are materials damaged/created in transportation, during the lifetime of the solar farm and upon completion dealt with?

We heard yesterday that Helios will hold responsibility for the recycling and decommissioning of any materials associated with the project and the lifespan of 35 years of the project was widely communicated.

Gateway of Concern - balance would need to be maintained, this should have been included in the economic development meeting CODC had here in Ranfurly during the time of the notification determination.

The Economic Development arm of CODC held a meeting last year where we discussed economic opportunities for the area. I attempted to bring up the plans for solar in the area and the potential for the Mānīatoto to become solar panel central and what it would mean for our community. I was 'hushed' by a member of the community, stating that it was all 'under control'. This was the first red flag for me and I became concerned about why things had gone quiet. Then I was approached by concerned residents and adjoining landholders. I supported their idea of a public meeting to discuss this further and this was when our eyes were fully opened to the scale of the proposal.

Visibility - the location is too central to our main townships of Naseby and Ranfurly and SH8.

To state that visibility would be negligible from 1km away is completely ignoring the slight on the landscape a solar farm to this scale would create from any elevation. Their view will be affected.

Yesterday highlighted issues for me around the right hand not talking to the left hand with the landscape plan lacking acknowledgment of planting advice provided by local catchment group Tiaki Mānīatoto nor the opportunity to strengthen and grow the nursery which has been established growing ecosourced plants in Pātearoa. A huge opportunity to secure a community entity but yes, missed completely by yHelios. Should this project go ahead any nursery would require notice to go ahead and begin propagation of ecosourced plants.

Our experience with planting natives in the area has been successful and Tiaki have been proud of our success rate in such an extreme climate BUT I have serious concern for any of the applicant's planting when Title OT10B/1337 has no irrigation, is a dry land farm. The other Title OT9C/187 does have irrigation via Hawkdun Idaburn Irrigation scheme but cannot be used cross title. The concept of crystals for irrigation was interesting to say the least. If you'd like an example of the requirement for water to grow trees in the Mānīatoto I suggest looking at the boundary planting around the Naseby Space Radar for where no irrigation has left the plantings spindly and unhealthy.

So, although Helios have countered any suggestion of a bond for materials involved in the solar farms construction I would raise a suggestion of a planting bond even if they require a 80% planting success rate to meet consent.

FIRE RISK AND BATTERIES

Fire/wind- the Mānīatoto is defined as a desert due to low rainfall and high winds, one spark on a tinder dry day and there's so much risk of those batteries going alight and the firefighters unable to fight it as cannot use water.

I commend the Otago Regional Council for supporting the removal of the BESS battery component, however, support the concern for how introducing them again at a later stage would be mitigated. I have been advised that the battery component has also been suggested on the other proposed sites in the area.

I was also left questioning whether the conversations with FENZ had actually met with a resolution as we were advised believe yesterday.

Community benefit - little, if any, community benefit to the Mānīatoto.

Unfortunately, lack of transparency has lead to a lack of trust. Although we are told the battery component has been withdrawn I do still worry that these can be brought back in at any time.

Develop trust: A Mānīatoto community fund (managed by democratically voted for community members/leaders) to the value of at least \$25m initially, that is \$1m for each year of the lifespan of the panels. Then at least \$500,000 per annum thereafter. This will give us a chance to have a fund like Central Lakes Trust which we are not part of.

If the CODC is to support such a committed industrial addition to the area they pay rates to live in, we need to be able to ensure there are effective and long standing to the people who live, play and stay in Central Otago. This will only go a small way to appease potential property values decreasing, the disruption of a landscape of significant scenic value. We have award winning photographers living here ... that's 100% to do with the landscape. We will no longer have an untouched landscape. We will no longer be seen as a place to step back in time, a place where time moves a little slower and we are purely here as guests within a stunning, rugged,

BOND - A \$10m clean up fund bond. This ensures if the site is left unmanageable then there are funds for the landholder for this.

The bond was discussed yesterday and, without being privvy to the lease agreement with the local landholders, I would hope they are satisfied with what will ensure happen at the 35 year mark.

Wetlands

Full protection of all wetland and waterways on the properties via the appropriate instruments (easements) to be issued within landholder title in perpetuity (surveying and legal fees to be covered for the landholder by the applicant).

My point in my submission regarding FULL protection of wetlands was somewhat appeased yesterday by the identification and proposed native planting of the wetlands. As stated, the 5mtr setback for the small wetlands and 10mtrs for the larger wetlands is still in breach and this will obviously be addressed in the Otago Regional Council consent process. This breach would affect the commercial viability of the propose the wetlands to be formalised via covenant and not just fencing and for this to be added on title for post project security.

Maintain a benchmark for the exemplar on how solar can work in communities.

There is a whakataukī or proverb in Te Ao Māori, "Ka mua, ka muri" that translates to "walking backwards into the future" or "looking back in order to move forward". What we accept today is our future generations past. We are making formative decision here and the decision made by our Council to consent this proposal is

Are we sacrificing our World of Difference to meet New Zealand's renewable energy targets simply because we have good sun?

Ngā mihi nui for having me here today and trusting me with your time.