

Access dispute slows tunnel work

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By ROCHELLE WARRANDER

A LAND access dispute has put in doubt the completion of an important stretch of North Taranaki's White Cliffs Walkway.

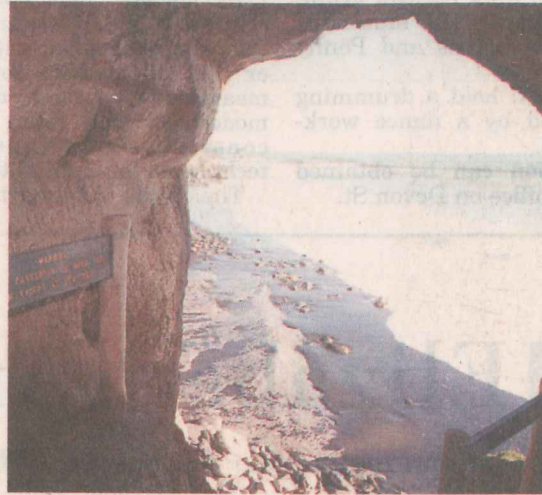
Repair work on the historic Te Horo Stock Tunnel, closed by the Department of Conservation (DOC) in 1995 because it feared it was a danger to the public, has been stalled because of a dispute involving a North Taranaki landowner, the New Plymouth District Council (NPDC) and DOC.

Although all parties in the wrangle were staying tightlipped yesterday, NPDC parks director Grant Porteous confirmed restoration work on the tunnel had been put on hold while negotiations took place with the landowner, Russell Gibbs, over access.

"All I can really say is that our contractor has had to withdraw from the site. Negotiations are under way with the landowner. We are keen to get in and get the work finished. We are only one step away from completing it and now we have a problem with access," Mr Porteous said.

Mr Gibbs would not comment on why he would not allow access to the tunnel, but DOC's New Plymouth manager, Murray Crombie, said it was down to a misunderstanding between Mr Gibbs, DOC and other agencies over funds for fencing on his property.

Although the tunnel was on a paper road



TUNNEL VISION: Te Horo Stock Tunnel, looking through to the northern end of White Cliffs Beach.

owned by the NPDC, vehicle access to it was through Mr Gibbs' property.

Mr Gibbs had refused McKenzie Construction access to the tunnel to finish the repair work. It would take only about a day to finish the work on the tunnel if the contractor was allowed access,

Mr Porteous said. It had been hoped to have the work finished last week.

The spraying of concrete on to the interior of the tunnel was all that was required before it could be opened to the public again, Mr Porteous said.

Repair work began last May thanks to a \$53,000 grant from the Lottery Grants Board, \$10,000 from the TSB Community Trust and \$20,000 from the NPDC.

The 80m tunnel has been fraught with controversy since it was closed following the Cave Creek tragedy.

The tunnel had allowed people to complete a loop of the White Cliffs Walkway by walking along the beach.

Debate between the NPDC and DOC over who would fund the restoration work initially held up the project for four years.

The establishment of the Te Horo Tunnel Restoration Society finally pushed the work ahead, raising the funds needed to reinforce and seal the tunnel, and to remove earth from the floor to expose some of its cobblestone base.

The tunnel has a colourful history. Construction began in 1859, but was abandoned in 1860 with the outbreak of the Land Wars. Work resumed in 1888 and it was finished a year later.

The tunnel was part of the main route north and was used as a mail route until 1909. The last sheep went through it in 1960 en route to the Waitara freezing works.