

# Stock tunnel rusts as dispute drags on

By ROCHELLE WARRANDER

EXPENSIVE restoration work on North Taranaki's historic Te Horo Stock Tunnel could be in vain unless a land access dispute is resolved soon.

At the Taranaki-Whanganui Conservation Board meeting in Stratford at the weekend, member Kevin Phillips said new steelwork in the tunnel was rusting because the contractor could not access the tunnel to finish the restoration work.

"The steel work is deteriorating because the elements are very harsh there.

"I believe that unless the whole thing is sandblasted to clean the steel before it's concreted, the amount of money put into the project will be wasted.

"It's a sad situation to be in," he said.

Repair work on the 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 North Taranaki land owner Russell Gibbs, the New Plymouth District Council (NPDC) and DOC.

Although the tunnel was on a paper road owned by the NPDC, vehicle access to it was through Mr Gibbs's property.

Mr Gibbs was denying access to the tunnel as a way of lobbying DOC and the NPDC to pay for fencing on his property.

"The issue is down to fencing of the property, 12km of fencing, an excess cost of \$200,000," Mr Phillips said. "Russell is a very hard man to negotiate with. All

the structural work has been done on the tunnel. We were basically one day away from completion," he said.

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.

Before it was closed, the tunnel allowed people to complete a loop of the White Cliffs Walkway by walking along the beach.

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.

But Mr Gibbs said yesterday that he was not concerned about whether or not the tunnel could be finished. He said the reason why he was stopping people from

getting to the tunnel was because the NPDC had reneged on the fencing agreement.

Mr Gibbs said he had agreed to protect and place a covenant on about half of his farm, about 184ha, which was considered by the council as being environmentally significant, in return for about 18km of it being fenced.

Access to the tunnel, through his property, was also part of the agreement, Mr Gibbs said.

He said he was not giving in and that he would take the fencing issue to court if he had to.

Mr Gibbs was also the centre of debate in the public forum section of the conservation board meeting.

Federated Farmers policy analyst Reg

Trowern said he was annoyed that Mr Gibbs had apparently been given a \$6000 grant from DOC to put up some boundary fencing on his property.

"I have got nothing against Russell Gibbs, but if you (DOC) are going to gift fencing to farmers you have to treat them all fairly. I believe only 50% of the costs should have been paid, as with the Fencing Act. It is going to be difficult when your people go out in the future pushing the Fencing Act for fencing between the DOC estate and private land," Mr Trowern said.

DOC New Plymouth area manager Murray Crombie said that although it was unusual for two neighbours not to share the costs of fencing, there were special circumstances in the Gibbs case.