

01 June 2023

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Tēnā koe e [REDACTED]

Thank you for your Official Information Act request to the Department of Conservation (DOC), received on 04 May 2023 in which you asked questions about the DOC managed Morere Hot Springs.

Your questions and our responses are listed below:

1. *Is there a current manager onsite at Morere Hot Springs? If so why are emails and calls going unanswered?*
 - As Morere Hot Springs is currently closed, a regular DOC supervisor is not on site. Casual staff have undertaken upkeep of the grounds over this time. To account for this, the facility's primary means of contact (ph 06 8378856) is currently on 'answer phone'. The message provided notes the 'closed' status of the facility and refers the caller to the DOC website www.doc.govt.nz for further information. On our website, the red 'ALERT for Morere Springs Area' details the closure; the reason; and the date this was last reviewed. The web page also provides the reader with contact details for the Gisborne DOC Office where additional information can be sought if required.

The email address morere@doc.govt.nz is monitored for incoming messages through the Gisborne DOC Office and responses are sent as soon as practicable. We are not aware of any unanswered mail requests.
2. *Who is the contractor DoC has outsourced the springs to be run by, if any?*
 - As noted above, current operations at Morere Hot Springs is not being outsourced. Our staff instead undertake regular upkeep activities at the facility and grounds.
3. *What is the number of days the site been closed in total since the first 2020 Covid-19 shutdown?*
 - We are unable to provide the exact number of days Morere Hot Springs has been non-operational over that period. We can however confirm that Morere Hot Springs had initially closed in response to all mandated COVID-19 national directives and

their timeframes. Between January and December 2022; the Springs were able to open intermittently as staff availability allowed post Covid. Primarily, this was on weekends and Wednesdays.

With no intention of permanent closure, Morere Hot Springs has been advertised as closed since Wednesday 21 December 2022, primarily for repairs.

4. *It used to be closed just one day per year - Christmas Day. Now, it is rarely if ever open. What is going on from DoC's perspective?*

- Closure of the facility since December 2022 is primarily due to septic system failure; lack of availability of a suitably experienced and qualified contractor to remedy it; ongoing staff shortages; and a further failure of a main hot water pipeline, post cyclones Hale and Gabrielle.

5. *When will it be reopened? What are the plans for reopening and sourcing staff?*

- A programme of remedial work for the above issues is in the planning and resourcing stage of preparation. This requires contractor availability/commitment and a long period of reasonably dry weather. If this can be facilitated, then optimally Morere Hot Springs will re-open early 2024. A firm plan for staffing also exists for this re-opening.

6. *Sources tell me there is at least \$100,000 of plumbing and related repairs required, including significant sewage repairs which is as I understand it not apportioned within the \$100,000 figure. Is DoC planning to or committed to paying for this? If so, when will repairs begin and when are these expected to be finished?*

- Please refer to our response above (5) which confirms our commitment to undertaking essential repairs and optimally re-opening the Springs in early 2024 if possible.

7. *Can you confirm the plumbing has not been updated since the 1970s?*

- Plumbing at the Springs has received regular facility maintenance and the occasional necessary fault and/or breakage repairs as required. It has not been entirely 'replaced'.

8. *Multiple sources have said the springs are in "disarray" that staff including managers are constantly being "reshuffled" that it has effectively "stopped working" and "no one knows what is going on". People express "heartbreak" at the situation - and "confusion". Would be great to hear from DoC in regards to these sentiments?*

- We are also disappointed at the relatively long albeit temporary period of closure at Morere Hot Springs due to unforeseen repair issues. As an organisation we however always consider public/staff health and safety first; in any decision to open. Morere Hot Springs must be fit for purpose and safe for all users. This includes having



appropriate levels of staffing with relevant expertise, particularly around facility maintenance, customer service and staff and public supervision.

9. *Sources have said the previous manager was anti-vax and was not allowed on-site. It's said she had "control over everything and once she left took all that information with her" and that she was not allowed on the premises due to her vaccination status but, without her, "it got turned upside down, everything fell apart". I would like DoC comment on these claims, please.*
- As the vaccination status of individuals, including DOC staff is a private matter we decline to comment on this aspect of your request. We can say, however, that COVID-19 had a significant effect on our ability to re-instate appropriate staffing levels post-lockdowns and the mandatory COVID response period.
10. *Is DoC aware of any inter iwi/hapu infighting over land and other rights? Has this been a factor at all in the hold up, or decline and what amounts to the effective closure of the springs? Is there tension between Iwi/Crown relations in this regard that is contributing to the status of the springs?*
- The reinstatement of Morere Hot Springs by DOC has from the onset, been in discussion by and with tangata whenua. We expect that the planning for the future of any entity and its management, where there are multiple interests, will continue to require robust discussion. Considerations regarding the planning for repair and re-opening of the Springs facility is no exception to this.
11. *Multiple sources also said DoC "want to knock it down and build a \$14m complex" in line with a Rotorua tourism model, and that DoC stated they had kaumatua approval for this. Can DoC confirm?*
- Initially a 'far reaching' concept design 're-inventing' the facility was commissioned and drafted. This was prepared in conjunction with our iwi partners, however this has not been taken further by DOC. As noted above we are now in the planning and resourcing stage that would see the repair and re-opening of the Springs in its current format and at the same scale.
12. *It has also been expressed that DoC missed an opportunity by not creating and marketing the springs as an holistic/wellness centre. Comment holds DoC run it as a bureaucracy albeit one that does not work. There are for example stories of the springs having to close for the fact there was not "regulation cleaning liquid" while there was an alternative liquid. Any comment?*
- As noted in our above response (11), some alternative options and opportunities have been considered. While we are concerned with encouraging the safe recreational use of Public Conservation Land through the provision of basic facilities; as an organisation we are generally not in the commercial domestic and/or tourism business. Concessionaires may be considered an appropriate avenue for those activities on a case-by-case basis.



The operation at Morere Hot Springs is subject to all normal business legislative requirements; DOC government department policies; and current Standard Operating Procedures. We are aware of a specific issue around cleaning fluid.

13. *A kaumatua who led settlement claims, from Ngāti Rakaipaaka, said DoC "didn't look at the springs from a health perspective, where the mineral waters were part of a health initiative, they only wanted it there as a tourist attraction". Can DoC comment on this claim?*

Please refer to our response above (12). Interest in the running of Morere Hot Springs as a business from our iwi partners; prospective concessionaires; and/or other business organisations or individuals, is encouraged.

Thank you for your interest. Please note that this letter (with your personal details removed) may be published on the Department's website.

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Nāku noa, nā

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Jade Kinghazel
Regional Operations Director, Eastern North Island
Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai