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Money issues delay plant

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By Chris Gardner

The company behind the suspended resource consent application to build Paewira, a waste to energy plant in Te Awamutu, does not have the capital to pay its bill.

Environmental Protection Authority chief executive Allan Freeth revealed that in a letter to Waipā District Council chief executive Steph O'Sullivan after she and mayor Mike Pettit wrote to the authority sharing their concern about the suspended case.

The authority has previously declined to discuss aspects of the issue citing commercial sensitivity – but the delay, now into a fifth month, has put the application in limbo, and left opponent in Te Awamutu concerned.

Global Contracting Solutions' plans to burn waste to create energy on a Racecourse Rd site was regarded as nationally significant by Environment Minister Penny Simmonds and the matter went to a board of inquiry.

A decision was expected on August 28, but the hearing was suspended two weeks before that.

Freeth, who will step down in June after 10 years in the role, told Waipā District Council the authority had yet to receive payment, or an indication of when full payment would be made.

"The applicant has indicated they are attempting to raise capital to pay the costs to date," he told the council.

"We acknowledge the community interest in reaching a decision, however, ultimately, the EPA must act prudently to protect taxpayer funds. We are therefore seeking full payment from the applicant in order to lift the suspension and reconvene the

independent board."

Global Contracting Solutions learned the application had been suspended by the authority on August 13 as the Board of Inquiry prepared to rule on the application for a site on Racecourse Road.

It has not commented on the issue in recent months, but company co-owner Craig Tuhoro posted an online video saying he was struggling to understand why it was a political issue and "why we have so much activism around it... we believe in the environment, we believe this is the right thing to do."

The application spawned the creation of the Don't Burn Waipā pressure group and attracted more than 2000 submissions – 64 per cent against the plant – including one from Waipā District Council which, with Waikato Regional Council, are owed a combined \$100,000 by the applicant.

The EPA has declined to say how much the company owes.

"The EPA's role in this matter is only to provide support to the independent board of inquiry. It is not the decision-maker and does not have an interest in the outcome of the final decision," Freeth said.

"Under the 'applicant pays' consenting regime, the EPA helps the independent board by processing its invoices, with the costs then being recovered from the applicant. The legislation gives the EPA power to suspend the independent board's processing if an applicant has not paid those costs. Such suspensions are not subject to an expiry date but rather must be lifted once the applicant has

paid the costs recoverable.

"In this case, there is considerable debt that the taxpayer is carrying, due to non-payment by the applicant. We are requiring payment before the process can be resumed, and the independent board can be reconvened to reach a decision. I understand that a decision would be due under legislation within 11 working days once the independent board was reconvened."

O'Sullivan wrote to Freeth in November expressing concern regarding the continued delay in determining the application.

"Since public notification of the application in September 2023, the proposal has generated substantial public interest and a high degree of concern within our district," she said.

She said with the hearing concluded in early July, a decision was anticipated soon thereafter.

"Council has made its position clear in not supporting the plant at the proposed location. Nonetheless, the extended delay in finalising this decision is creating considerable uncertainty for council, residents, and key stakeholders."

Given the scale and importance of the matter, O'Sullivan said, the council believed it was in the public interest for a resolution to be reached as soon as practicable.

At the same time mayor Mike Pettit wrote to EPA chair Barry O'Neill expressing his concern regarding the ongoing delay.



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An artist's impression of the proposed Paewira plant.