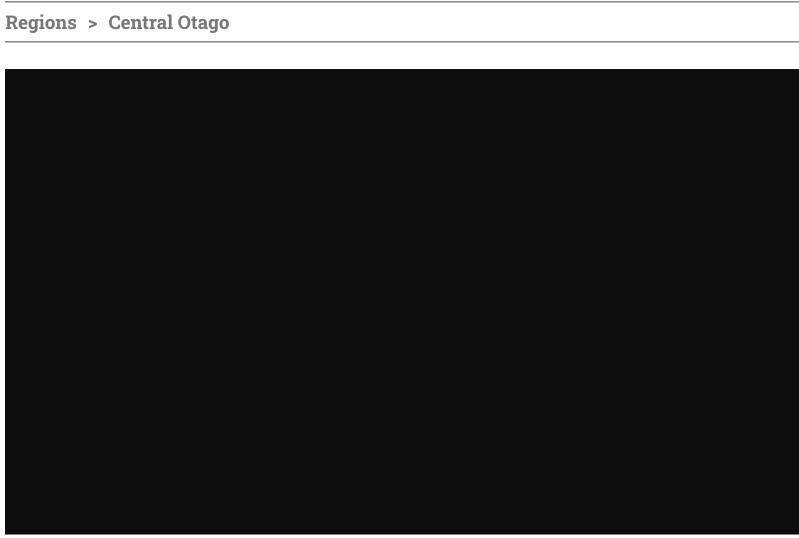
# Saturday, **13 September 2025** 'Think of the chaos if the mine comes'

**By Mary Williams** 



In a David and Goliath fight, Central Otago campaigners are battling to protect the Dunstan Mountains from an open-cast gold mine up for fast-tracking, Mary Williams Santana Minerals talks as though it has permission to dig its dream property overlooking

the Lindis Valley — four open-cast pits, underground mining, a factory to extract the gold and a huge pile of toxic leftovers.

The Brisbane firm is churning out announcements to the Australian stock exchange — 11 in August alone — about its proposal for westerly flanks, valleys and streams in the Dunstan Mountains above Tarras and Bendigo.

One celebrates that the mine will dig into "private farmland, with agreements to mine in

place" and conditions are pitched as perfect. The area, running down towards the settlements of Tarras and Bendigo and the Lindis and Clutha rivers, is "blessed" with infrastructure including a "freshwater borefield". A mine timeline is sketched: get going early next year, retrieve gold by mid-2027. A

recent Santana press release claims the mine, once closed, will improve biodiversity, the

company talking of building wetlands and lizard habitats. Although Santana shares exist, the existence of its massive mine or future conservation hero status is unassured. Santana is banking on "imminently" applying for, and getting, approval to mine through the government's Fast-track Approvals Act 2024 which, through decisions by panels, aims to consent primary industry with minimal fuss. Santana, which has also applied for a mine permit from New Zealand Petroleum and

Minerals, believes it can, as part of the approval processes, navigate around a conservation covenant that protects land it wants to mine. The covenant was put in place decades ago by the Department of Conservation (Doc) to preserve landscape, plants, creatures, archaeological sites and, critically, streams. The land also borders Doc conservation land. A clause in the covenant says mining can be allowed by ministers and Resource Minister

Shane Jones, in his cap emblazoned "drill, baby, drill", has unavoidable views. He recently posted that mining would not be stopped by "catastrophised frogs or people" weaponising the wildlife act". Sustainable Tarras spokesman Rob van der Mark says the situation is "the other way

round. The government is going hell for leather with fast-track and we are having to fight to claw back pre-existing rights". "Every community that has a fast-track under way is struggling. The government is doing things in undemocratic ways ... Shane Jones is ruthless."

**Community ignored** 

Hayden Johnston wants nature, not a gold mine. PHOTO: STEPHEN JAQUIERY Santana is required to consult with local authorities and iwi before submitting its fasttrack application, but is not required to share with the general public any reports it plans to include.

Santana's case, unless asked. Santana spokeswoman Vicki Blakeborough says people who turn up to Santana's "dropins" are supportive and emphasises there are "no conservation areas in the project footprint", meaning no areas owned by Doc. A map on the Santana website does not show the covenanted area.

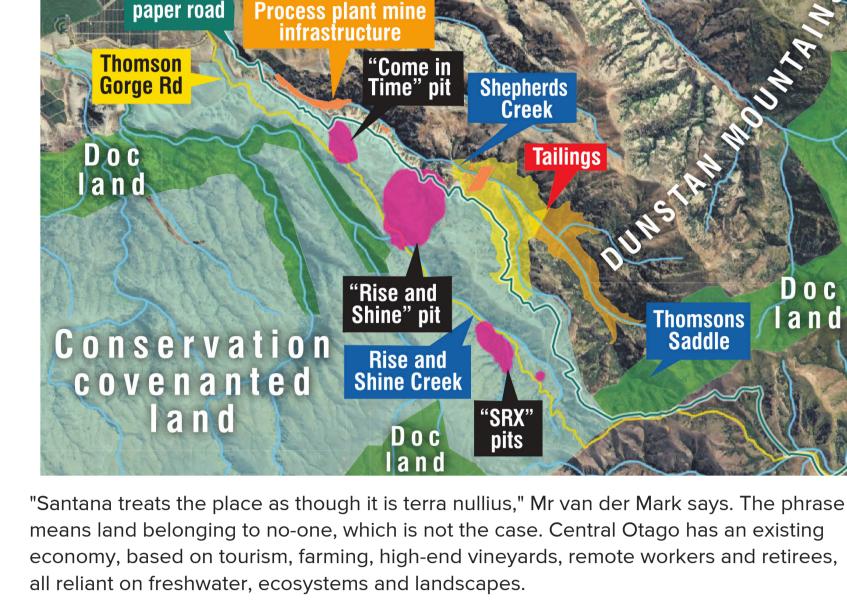
"disingenuous" and its drop-ins are "scant on detail ... there is no evidence Santana is interested in wider community engagement". "The company is trying to fly under the radar while running down the clock on increasing community concerns and opposition before its fast-track application is filed." Sustainable Tarras has run public meetings raising concerns about Santana's scheme and asked Santana 55 questions largely about damage and threats to the environment, including fossil fuel use and the risk of chemicals leaching into waterways. Santana has

The fast-track proposal to mine in the Dunstan Mountains

not answered.

Council

warned that it was planning to decline it.



**Inconsistent with the covenant** Since 2017, Doc has granted Santana numerous permissions to explore within the conservation covenanted area, by test drilling and building digger-wide access tracks that criss-cross the land. However, on July 28, Santana withdrew its latest exploration application after Doc

given the heads-up that its application was "inconsistent with the objectives of the [conservation] covenant".

The move indicates that at least one authority still considers the covenant worthy of upholding. The conservation covenant has required the two high-country farmer-landowners — the owners of Bendigo and Ardgour Stations — to care for the land by not over-grazing and not destroying the historical mining sites dotted around the landscape.



of four pits planned, would be 1km long by 800m wide.

In a podcast last year, Santana boss Mr Spring talked about the mining process. "We would take the vegetation and top soil and put that to one side to be stored and

reused in the rehabilitation at the end."

two-way consultation" would occur.

The language sounds gentle but then Mr Spring talks about "lifting the scab". It is minespeak for digging down 200m. Post-mine landscapes show the pits relabelled lakes, and a dam holding back the tailings, the large slurry piles left over from the gold-extraction

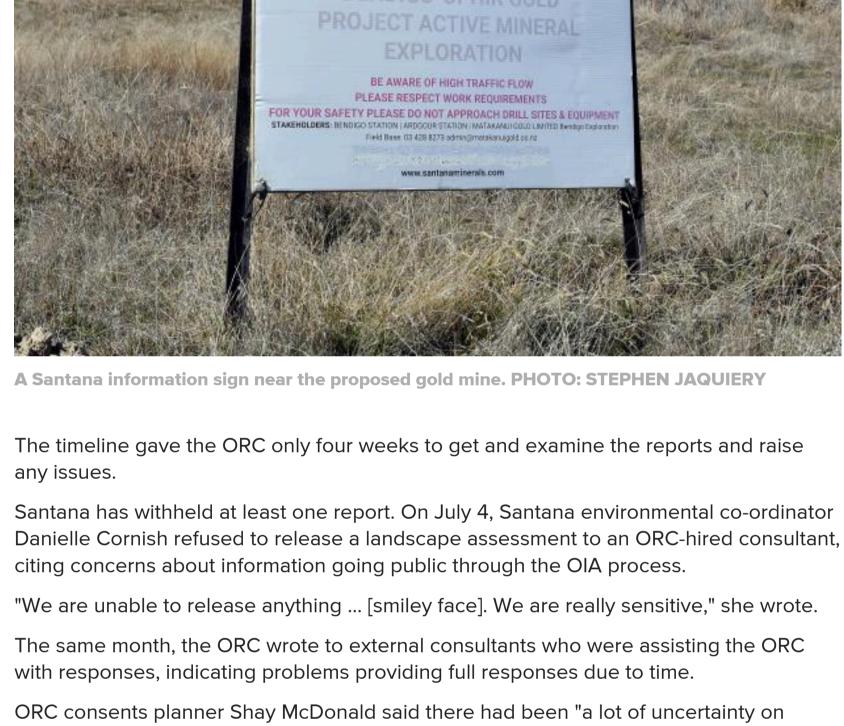
process that uses crushing and cyanide. There is concern that the mine will only get bigger if green-lighted and lead to other mining companies, already exploring the region, getting permission. Santana's project name, the Bendigo-Ophir Gold Project, indicates likely mine creep: Santana's 30km "strike regional exploration programme" spills east over the mountain range's spine and on to farming flats around Ophir.

Otago Regional Council (ORC) consents manager Alexandra King told the ODT time spent advising Santana, during the pre-application stage of its fast-track bid, was being "managed within ORC's existing resourcing", and costs were being billed to Santana. However, she adds that the council "relies on applicants to engage constructively in the pre-application process, including timely sharing of relevant information. If information is

Santana environment manager Mary Askey, who previously worked for a gelatin manufacturer, apologised for her "tardiness" and said it had been "quite frantic". In late May, she provided report titles, asked the ORC which ones it wanted and said there was an intention to apply for fast-track by late June.

SANTANA

MINERALS LIMITED



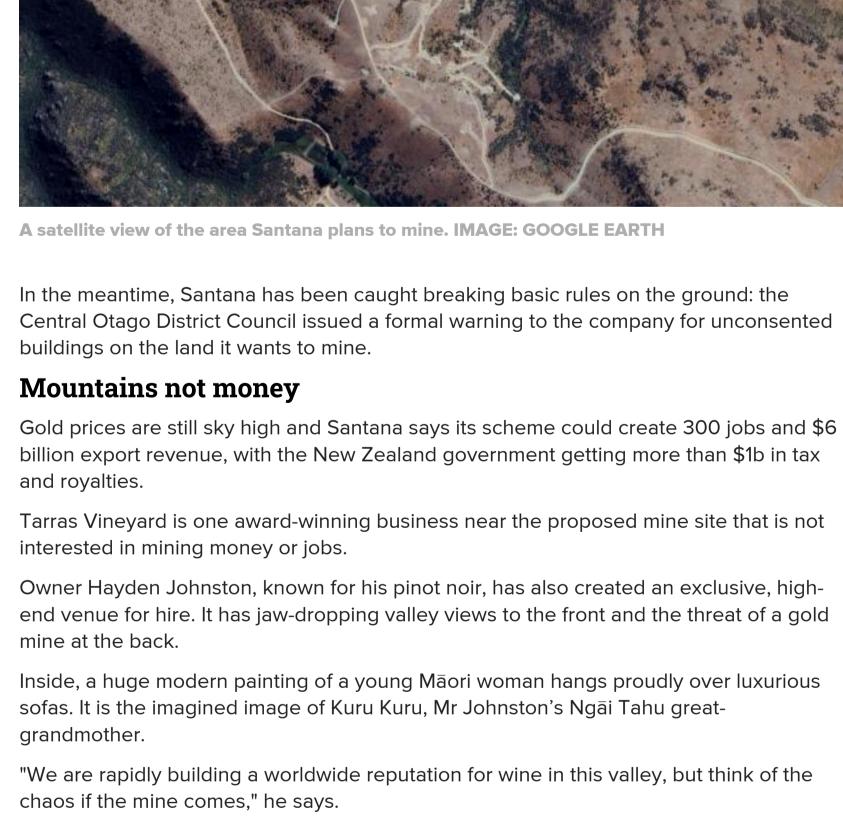
**Report concerns** At least two of Santana's environmental reports sent to the ORC have come to light through OIAs and raise alarm bells about water quality. A Santana report called "Assessment of Effects on Aquatic Habitat" was scrutinised for the ORC by Torlesse Environmental principal scientist Dr Michael Greer, who said in a note to the council in June, he had "significant concerns" because the report only addressed a "subset" of issues at stake.

"The author [Santana] doesn't seem comfortable providing a clear indication of the

magnitude of the adverse effects associated with the activities."

reports in advance of lodging the application."

unaffected and superior quality water source." In a section of its website labelled fast-track submission reports, Santana has published just one report, about economic benefits.



"If they get started they won't be leaving Central Otago. There is a lot at stake. "They [mining companies] speak the right words to us, but at the end of the day, it is not necessarily what transpires."

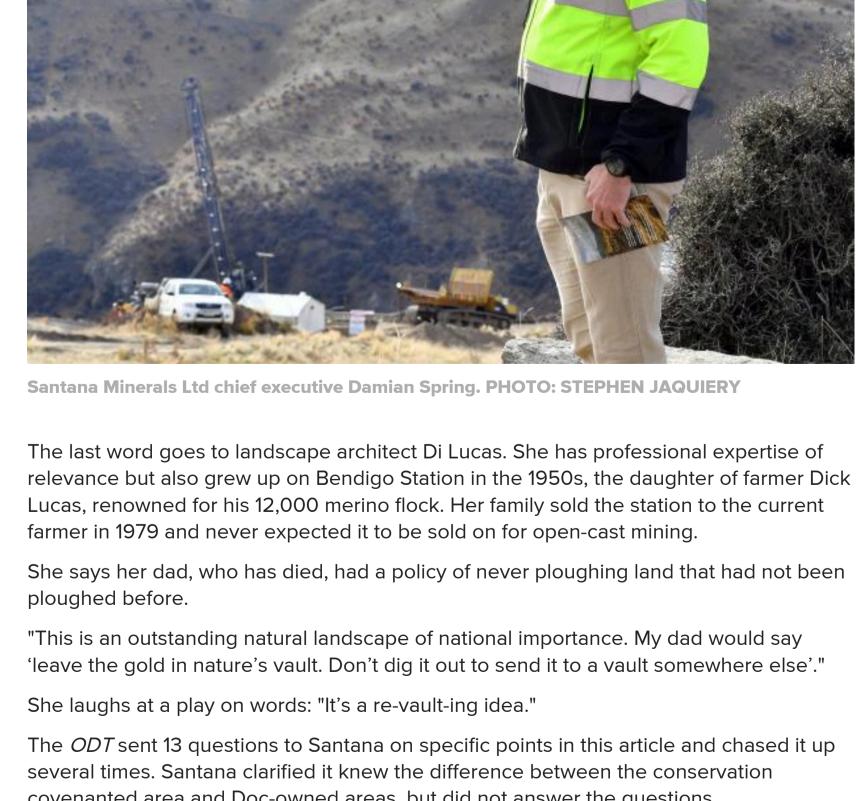
experience of seeing the Macraes gold mine expand and speaks about an "appalling

Santana has been on his marae to talk about its scheme and Ngāi Tahu is looking at its

lack of engagement" when that mine was set up.

The plan is "a wee bit disturbing".

reports, but there is concern and scepticism, he says.



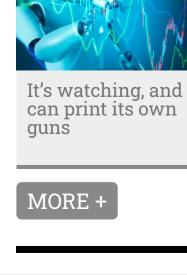
covenanted area and Doc-owned areas, but did not answer the questions. The Ministry for the Environment's website proclaims the fast track-process "will deliver significant national or regional benefits". Environmental not-for-profit organisation the Environmental Defence Society (EDS) questions this, and is deeply concerned about the Santana proposal. EDS chief executive Gary Taylor red-flags the proposal's "size, complexity and the environmental, social and cultural impact" and says "the ecological impacts are not fully understood".

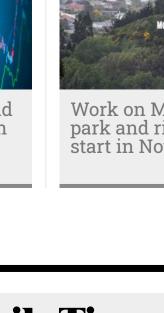
requirement to consider evidence from not-for-profits and others. Mr Taylor calls for time and a proper hearing of Santana's proposal with "crossexamination of expert witnesses and as robust processes as can be put together under this somewhat objectionable new law".

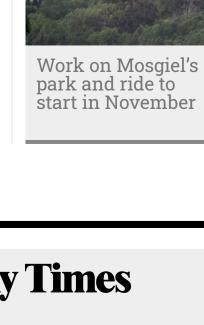
He slams Santana for its lack of transparency. It is playing a "secret kind of game that

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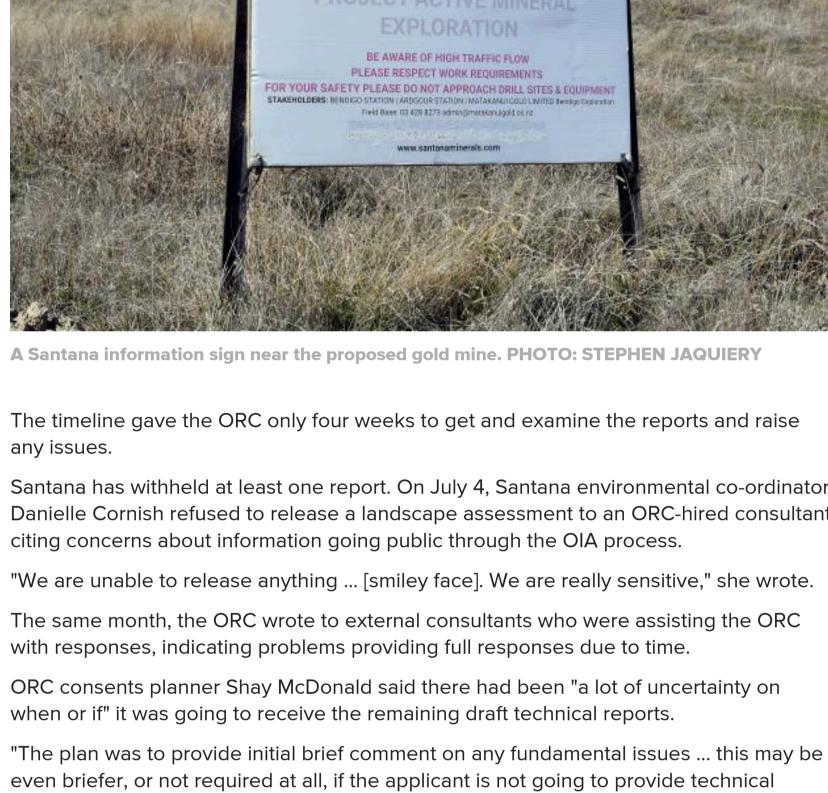
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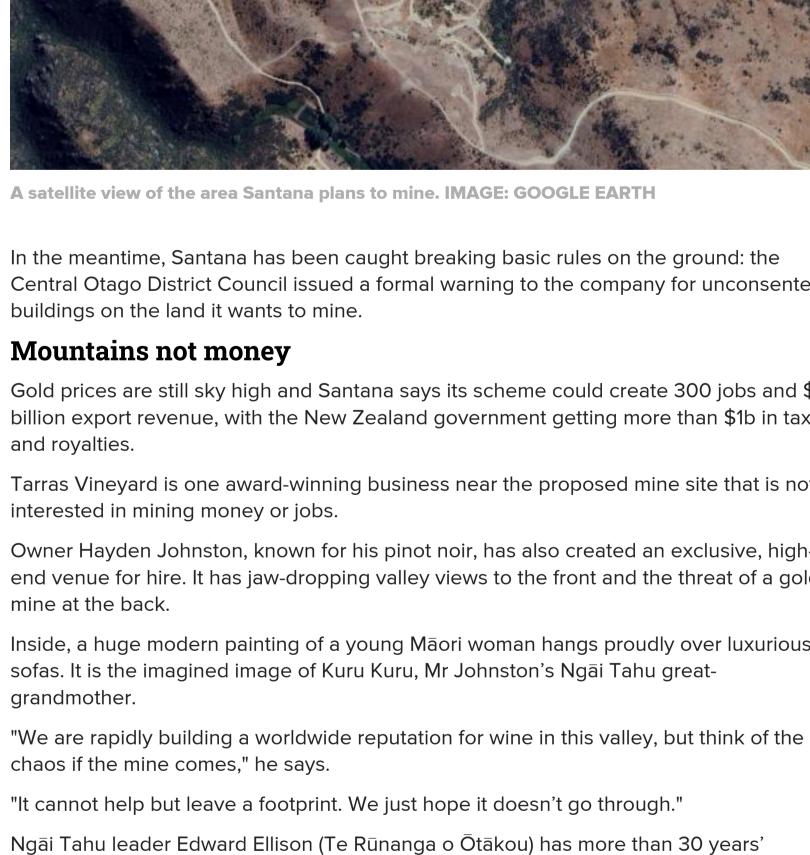


A Santana map of its proposed mines appears to show its biggest pit cutting across ridges, valleys, a public gravel road and historic mining sites. The Rise and Shine pit, one Otago Goldfields Heritage Trust ex-president Martin Anderson says any destruction or damage to a historic site would be "outrageous".

Stilted consultation not supplied ... applicants are advised that this limits the scope of the comments provided by council." Official Information Act (OIA) requests for local authority correspondence with Santana reveal there have been problems extracting information from Santana this year. ORC consents team leader Peter Christophers repeatedly sought clarity about Santana's schedule, stressing ORC staff needed time to meet the expectation that "meaningful



Another Santana report, assessing the mine's potential impacts on groundwater, warns of "significant uncertainties" and a threat to safe domestic water supplies in the valley below the mine. The report, by consultants Komanawa Solutions Ltd, suggests the mine company could enable "the development of reticulated water supplies that were drawn from an



doesn't enhance its social licence", he says. Mr Taylor also points to a major challenge with the fast-track process : the lack of "Parliament has done its best to stack the odds against public interest in this process as much as they can. We will see whether that has been successful in this case."

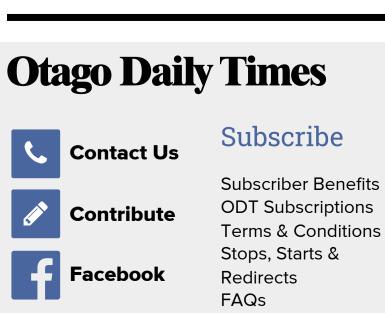


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