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Giant step forward for one of New Zealand's largest solar farms

Christchurch Airport's renewable energy precinct, Kōwhai Park has taken a giant step closer to reality.

After a year-long process, that attracted interest from organisations across the globe, the airport has chosen one of New Zealand's largest energy companies, Contact Energy, and international solar developer, Lightsource bp, as its partners to deliver phase one of the park.

The first stage of the park will consist of a solar farm that will span around 300-hectares on land just behind the airport's runways.

Lightsource bp is a global leader in the development and management of solar energy projects. Its team includes over 1,000 industry specialists working across 19 global regions. In April 2022, Contact Energy and Lightsource bp entered an exclusive partnership to co-develop grid-scale solar farms in New Zealand.

Kōwhai Park is expected to be the first of a number of planned solar farms for the Lightsource bp and Contact Energy partnership in New Zealand.

Christchurch Airport chief executive Justin Watson says this marks a major milestone for Kōwhai Park which is an important project for Canterbury and New Zealand.

"Kōwhai Park will enable low emissions aviation and help provide the extra green energy New Zealand needs to transition away from fossil fuels. We're excited to have found partners with the technical capability to do this well and the values to ensure it's done right."

With around 300,000 solar panels, Kōwhai Park's solar farm will be among the largest in New Zealand.

In time, the park will be home to green hydrogen generation and able to meet the needs of high users of energy, like vertical farms and data centres.

The expected 150MW (or 170MWp) array will generate 290 GWh per year. This is equivalent to the annual demand of approximately 36,000 homes or approximately half of Christchurch's domestic flights being converted to low-emission technologies.

It will have the same carbon benefit as planting around 1.25 million native trees and shrubs.

Contact Energy CEO Mike Fuge says they're excited to announce this development partnership.

"We've committed to creating up to 380,000 megawatt hours of grid-scale solar generation by 2026, this project will deliver over half of that. We're bringing our proven track record of delivering domestic renewable projects in order to meet the massive anticipated demand for renewable electricity in New Zealand. Subject to a final investment decision, all going well construction will begin in 2024.

"As a partnership we are looking forward to working on Kōwhai Park Christchurch Airport to achieve our environmental aspirations and deliver on our commitment to lead New Zealand's decarbonisation."

Lightsource bp's Managing Director for Australia and New Zealand Adam Pegg says they're equally excited.

"We're delighted to launch our first project in New Zealand and to be partnering with organisations who, like us, want to play a leading role in New Zealand's decarbonisation.

"Lightsource bp has a strong international track record of successfully delivering utility scale solar projects, and with our partners at Contact Energy we look forward to working closely with Christchurch Airport on the development, construction and operation of Kōwhai Park," says Adam Pegg.

The project's gained wide support from across Canterbury.

Orion Group CEO Nigel Barbour says they're pleased to be able to support the project as the electricity lines company for central Canterbury.

"We are really excited to work with Christchurch Airport and these newly announced partners on this significant project in our region."

Environment Canterbury chair Peter Scott is pleased 159 hectares of land it leases to Christchurch Airport will become part of Kōwhai Park.

"Many people don't realise that Environment Canterbury is a significant land owner – it's exciting to see some of that land being used in an innovative way to provide a large-scale source of renewable energy. This project will make a big difference to Canterbury's efforts to decarbonise."

Justin Watson says Kōwhai Park will be ready to help decarbonise flights.

"Our goal is to ensure Kōwhai Park is ready to provide the large amount of green energy these new aircraft will need. This starts with the solar farm but will include green hydrogen generation down the track.

"This is an exciting time for aviation - zero and low emission aircraft are not far away. Our job is to do all we can to ensure they can take off as soon as possible," concludes Justin Watson.

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For more information or interviews please contact:

Jo Scott, Christchurch Airport

021 883 123

Jo.scott@cial.co.nz

Jody Bowman, Contact Energy

+64 21 029 537 32

jody.bowman@contactenergy.co.nz

Peter Flowers, Lightsource bp

+61 488 161 063

Peter.flowers@lightsourcebp.com

Background information

Christchurch Airport

Christchurch Airport has been recognised as global leader in sustainability.

Its greenhouse gas emissions have been independently audited every year since 2006 with Scope 1 emissions (those under its direct control) now nearly 90% lower than 2015 levels.

In 2020 it became the first airport in the world to reach the highest level of decarbonisation under the Airports Council International's carbon accreditation programme.

The airport's sustainability approach is science-based with targets set to ensure it decarbonises at a rate that will keep global warming to 1.5 degrees (the target enshrined in the Paris Agreement). It is currently 14 years ahead of where it needs to be.

Enabling other businesses, particularly its airline partners, to decarbonise is a key focus and its renewable energy precinct, [Kōwhai Park](#), is designed to provide the green energy the new generations of electric and hydrogen aircraft will require.

Contact Energy

Contact Energy is one of New Zealand's largest energy retailer and generators.

We generated 8.3 terawatt hours of electricity from hydro, geothermal and gas in the last financial year and have over 550,000 customers with electricity, gas and broadband connections.

Our vision is to build a better Aotearoa New Zealand by leading New Zealand's decarbonisation journey.

Lightsource bp

Lightsource bp is a global leader in the development and management of solar energy projects and is a 50:50 joint venture with bp, which is accelerating its net zero ambitions.

Lightsource bp's purpose is to deliver affordable and sustainable solar power for businesses and communities around the world. Its team includes over 1,000 industry specialists working across 19 global regions.

Lightsource bp provides full scope development for its projects, from initial site selection, financing and permitting through to long-term management of solar projects and power sales to its clients.