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Media Statement

EDS welcomes the Productivity Commission's thoughtful analysis of the thorny issue of urban planning

EDS welcomes the Productivity Commission's draft report on Better Urban Planning released today.

"New Zealand's urban population is growing and our urban planning framework is not coping with the strain. From our initial review of the Commission's draft report we think it provides a useful and thoughtful analysis of the issues," said EDS CEO Gary Taylor.

"The Commission has concluded New Zealand needs to be much more strategic in its urban planning. Clear environmental bottom lines need to be drawn so that development occurs within the capacity of the natural environment. Above those bottom lines development should be facilitated using spatial plans and flexible and responsive plan provisions.

"An environmental bottom line approach works for everyone," said Mr Taylor. "It gives the public certainty that the environment will be respected and remains healthy. And it gives developers the certainty and clarity needed to make investment decisions.

"For this approach to work bottom lines must be based on credible science. We are aware that although a 'Government Policy Statement' identifying national bottom lines might sound like a silver bullet, a single policy document might not be able to respond to the complexities of the natural environment.

"As the report rightly identifies, the urban environment is complex and there is no easy fix. There is a strong case for a bespoke planning approach. But care needs to be taken to ensure that changes designed to deal with urban pressures do not contaminate the rest of resource management practice.

"Limits on public participation from consultation through to appeal rights need to be approached with caution. An urban context does not change the fact that development often sees private interests benefit from the use of a public resource at the expense of the community. It is fair that people should have a say if that's the case.

"The same applies to limiting the role of the Environment Court. We have real reservations about establishing a national Independent Hearings Panel and limiting access to the Environment Court in line with the Auckland model. The Auckland unitary plan process favoured private interests with deep pockets and severely compromised the ability for the public to have a say. EDS held on by the skin of its teeth. The Council's decisions have only just been released and we have no idea how the appeal process will pan out or how the final plan will look. It is premature to suggest the roll-out of the Independent Hearings Panel model when there is no evidence on the quality of its outcomes.

"The Commission also identifies that environmental monitoring and enforcement are needed to secure positive environmental outcomes. EDS's senior policy advisor Dr Marie Brown has just finished traveling around the country gathering information about how effective current enforcement is. It's pretty clear things need to be ramped up. The

Government should give real thought to the Commission's proposal of a national enforcement agency.

"The Commission's terms of reference were narrowly focused on urban planning," said Mr Taylor.

"Any reform of the broader Resource Management system will need to consider wider issues. We are supportive of a conversation on these issues but would counsel against reaching premature conclusions."

"EDS will carefully review the draft report and give substantive input in its submission," concluded Mr Taylor.

Submissions on the draft report are due on 3 October 2016.