

Five big environmental changes coming in 2022

2022 will be a big year for environmental reform. The Resource Management Act will be repealed and replacement laws passed. Regional councils will continue developing new plans to better protect and improve freshwater. A start will be made on modernizing our conservation management system. Changes in the marine space are expected. Most importantly, our Emissions Reduction Plan will be in place by the middle of the year.

Collectively, these are the biggest changes in environmental management since the 1980s. They represent a concerted effort to modernize the way we manage our place and are well overdue. The series of environmental status reports produced annually by the Ministry for the Environment and Stats NZ reinforce the need for change: on most indicators we are continuing to harm our environment when we should be striving to improve it. We now know enough to recognize the damage that has been done in just 800 years of human settlement and can turn that around.

Let's dig a little deeper.

First, the Natural and Built Environments Act will replace the RMA. The case for change has been well made. The RMA is outdated and not delivering for society, business and the environment. The new legislation will focus on achieving positive outcomes rather than just managing environmental effects. There will be clearly defined environmental limits, fewer plans, faster plan-making and less need for consents. The Strategic Planning Act will integrate long-term spatial planning, infrastructure provision and funding across the new NBEA and other legislation. The two bills will proceed in tandem and that's essential: we need to see how they will work together. The new regime should be simpler, more agile and provide more certainty than the clunky and outdated RMA.

Secondly, regional council freshwater plans will be well underway during 2022, with communities engaged to develop local limits and targets consistent with national objectives. The obligation is to maintain freshwater quality – so there is no further deterioration – and to improve it in incremental steps over several years or even decades. It's not expected that change will be instant. That plan-making process will be guided by the National Policy Statement on Freshwater Management which sets bottom lines for a number of freshwater attributes. Plans must be completed by 2025. The obligation on farmers to reduce their pollution is reasonable and accepted by responsible farming entities. Most New Zealanders support the need to clean up our rural and urban waterways.

Thirdly, last month Conservation Minister Kiri Allan announced the start of what will be a lengthy process of reforming the panoply of conservation laws that apply to species management and the one-third of Aotearoa New Zealand that is administered by her department. Most of that legislation is very old: some going back to the 1950s. The regulatory tools that the department has available are so arcane and inefficient as to make its job almost impossible. There are new pressures and expectations that simply can't be addressed under the present regime. Included amongst them is the need to consider how

tourism on conservation land can be better managed and how we can better protect threatened species. Minister Allan intends to focus initially on the Wildlife Act 1953 which is a good place to start given the perilous status of much of our indigenous wildlife.

Fourthly, the proposed Rangitāhua Kermadec Ocean Sanctuary has been in the pipeline for many years now, delayed because of iwi opposition. It must be possible to advance that initiative this year and to find a way forward with a bespoke solution that satisfies all parties. The Marine Reserves Act 1971 is another piece of law that needs a makeover and more flexible marine protection methods need to be found both within the territorial sea and in our Exclusive Economic Zone. And while on matters marine, the implementation of the *Seachange Te Timu Tai Pari* spatial plan for the Hauraki Gulf has been inexcusably slow. Ministers and their agencies really need to deliver on better protection for the Gulf in 2022. The State of the Gulf reports show continuing decline, year by year, and that's not good enough.

Fifthly, the Emissions Reduction Plan will be finalized in May. This will be the government's response to the Climate Commission's recommendations and will set out the first stage in the pathway to net zero in 2050. It is important. The key question will be, what about agricultural emissions? That sector has cleverly delayed any methane reduction obligation for more than a decade and is essentially freeriding on the rest of the economy. *He waka eke noa* is the last-chance saloon for farmers to design their own scheme, but all indications are that it will be a desultory commitment not worth the implementation costs.

The sheer scale of these reforms presents an obvious challenge for the government and its key Ministers. The issues are complex and will need careful stewardship through Parliament. They also represent an important opportunity for National's new leader. He needs to walk the talk and shift his party away from aligning with opportunistic and unprincipled nay-sayers, into a more responsible and progressive place on environmental and climate change policies. We should all work together to protect our place.

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