

Healthy Land and Water

Aotearoa New Zealand is a global biodiversity hotspot, home to an estimated 80,000 native species and an extraordinary range of wildlife found nowhere else on Earth.

This natural inheritance is more than our heritage. It is living infrastructure that sustains our economy, communities and way of life. Healthy soils, forests, wetlands and waterways provide food and fibre, clean water, carbon storage, flood protection, recreation and a deep sense of cultural identity.

Protecting this foundation is one of New Zealand's greatest opportunities. Although we continue to lose indigenous habitats, almost half our river length is unsuitable for swimming and nearly 4,000 native species face extinction, we know how to turn this around. Restoring wetlands, controlling pests, keeping soil on the land and rewarding good stewardship can strengthen rural productivity, reduce disaster costs and make our communities more resilient.

Opportunity will put healthy land and water at the heart of New Zealand's future. We will treat nature as critical national infrastructure, support landowners and communities to restore it and build an economy where prosperity and environmental health reinforce each other. Our plan to make New Zealand one of the world's most ecologically resilient countries is built on five pillars.

1 - Restore the health of our lands and protect native biodiversity

Successive governments have undervalued our natural capital and failed to solve the problem of natural capital decline. As a result, our ecological infrastructure is eroding fast. Opportunity will turn our national investment in land and water science into policy and regulations that are integrated, evidence-based, responsive, and address systemic causes of ecosystem services decline rather than tinkering with symptoms.

Opportunity will:

- Increase Vote Conservation funding to a level where species and ecosystems begin to recover.
- Increase baseline funding to the QEII National Trust to \$8.5 million annually to accelerate covenanting of high-value habitats on private land.
- Rebalance the International Visitor Levy so that 75% of revenue goes directly to biodiversity recovery work.
- Ensure stable, coordinated funding for Predator Free 2050 networks, invasive weed and pest animal control, and strategic native afforestation and regeneration efforts.
- Reinstate the requirement for councils to identify and notify Significant Natural Areas under the National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity - paired with tools that allow landowners to earn real value from them.
- Establish a high-integrity biodiversity credit market to provide new revenue streams for farmers, landowners, and communities who protect and restore nature on private land.
- Require ETS compliance buyers to acquire a minimum of 5% of their non-auction carbon credits from native forest carbon accounting areas.

2 - Restore water quality and fix freshwater governance

Modelling in 2024 estimated that 44% of New Zealand's total river length was unsuitable for swimming. 12% of monitored sites exceeded the maximum acceptable level for nitrate-nitrogen in drinking water on at least one occasion, and 45% of monitored sites exceeded the pathogen E. coli drinking water standard.

Opportunity will:

- Reinstating Te Mana o te Wai as the governing principle of the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management - putting the health of waterways first.
- Explore incentives to reduce discharge of soluble fertilizer to streams, such as cap-and-trade schemes for nitrates and phosphates in defined catchments.
- Support councils and research institutes that are using innovative means to address high nitrate levels and efficient water use, and scale up investment in riparian planting and wetland restoration.
- Set heavier fines for polluters and ensure stricter enforcement for those who aren't meeting basic expectations by funding improved compliance monitoring.
- Embed rainwater harvesting in the Building Code, shifting it from a niche rural practice to a mainstream resilience tool.
- Incentivise novel on-farm water storage projects that also promote indigenous biodiversity through biodiversity credit systems and streamlined consenting processes.

3 - Transform land use to achieve long-term resilience and increase productivity

Many of New Zealand's environmental problems flow directly from land use that is incompatible with land capability. Examples include intensive dairy on porous plains and/or where irrigation is unsustainable, clear-cut forestry on unstable hill country, and grassland on erosion-prone lands better suited to permanent forest. Wilding conifers alone have already infested more than 2 million hectares, with experts warning that figure could reach around 6.7 million hectares – more than a quarter of New Zealand's total land area – within 30 years if left unmanaged.

Opportunity will:

- Work with farming communities to implement agroforestry, native forestry, sustainable peatland management, regenerative systems and other evidence-based climate resilient land-use changes.

- Match-fund levies agreed by agriculture and horticulture sectors up to a total of 0.2% of total production value for eligible research, development and extension. Governance will be shared among participating sectors.
- Support business and researchers to provide the environmental solutions of the future (as outlined in our [Breakthrough Economy](#) policy) by increasing R&D spend to 2% of GDP by 2030 and supporting land health innovation and cutting edge conservation technology.
- Implement a National Native Forestry Strategy and reform the ETS to require all carbon forestry to have a management plan that aligns land use with land capability.
- Set stronger harvest and maintenance standards for plantation forestry, particularly on erosion-prone lands, and raise penalty rates for non-compliance.
- Support reform of the Biosecurity Act to include development of a national long-term integrated plan and subsequent funding mechanisms to tackle invasive weed and pest animal proliferation.

4 - Embed nature as critical national infrastructure

The benefits nature provides - the air we breathe, flood protection, water filtration, carbon sequestration, coastal defence, and heat relief - are largely invisible in our public accounts and planning decisions. That invisibility has allowed us to destroy nature cheaply and rebuild it expensively, or not at all. Ecological infrastructure is not an economic externality; it is fundamental to the functioning of a biological economy.

While we cannot stop natural hazards, we can reduce our risk through prudent investments in natural infrastructure. Investments in natural capital and nature-based solutions save money in avoiding flood damage, erosion repair, and disaster recovery. Rivers can be made swimmable, wetlands restored, and native forests extended. These are investments in the New Zealand our children will inherit.

Opportunity will:

- Direct Treasury to develop technical standards for classifying ecological infrastructure as an asset in cost-benefit analyses and include natural infrastructure in the definition of infrastructure in the New Zealand Planning Bill.

- Recognise and support sanctuaries as biodiversity source sites and natural capital infrastructure.
- Recognise our economic dependence on natural systems as a national risk in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's National Risk and Resilience Framework.
- Establish a \$500 million Nature-based Solutions Fund (see our Intergenerational Infrastructure policy) accessible to local government, iwi and hapū, and other organisations delivering projects that reduce emissions, remove climate pollution from the atmosphere, restore biodiversity, and make our communities more resilient to the impacts of a changing climate.
- Overhaul the Fast-track Approvals Act, Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill to strip back Ministerial override powers and ensure environment and climate outcomes are given due consideration in decision-making processes.
- Repeal the regulatory relief provisions in the Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill, which will impede councils' ability to manage indigenous biodiversity and set higher environmental standards.

5 - Cut plastic pollution and build a circular economy

Aotearoa is drowning in plastic pollution. Around 1.6 million tonnes of plastic entered New Zealand in 2022 - 314 kilograms per person, including 51 kilograms per person of plastic packaging. Plastic waste continues to enter our waterways, soils and coastal ecosystems. Microplastics are now widespread in the environment and are an emerging concern for human health. New Zealand is missing the economic opportunity of moving from a linear, fossil-fuel-based plastics economy to a circular system that keeps valuable materials in use.

Opportunity will:

- Introduce a nationwide container deposit scheme, reinstating the completed scheme design halted in 2023, with a 20–30 cent refundable deposit on eligible containers and a target of 90% recovery within five years. The scheme will be producer-funded, with accessible return points including opportunities for iwi and hapū, schools and social enterprises to participate and benefit.

- Make producers responsible for the full lifecycle of their products, introducing mandatory product stewardship for major plastic categories, including binding reduction and recycled-content requirements, national design standards, transparent reporting and penalties for non-compliance.
- Phase out the most harmful and unnecessary plastics, including PVC, polystyrene and oxo-degradable plastics, while supporting businesses to transition to safer alternatives and scaling reuse and refill systems.
- Put a price on virgin fossil-fuel plastics, introducing a levy on primary polymers and using the revenue to fund circular-economy infrastructure, innovation, ecosystem restoration and community action to reduce plastic pollution.
- Protect nature and human health from plastic pollution by establishing national monitoring of microplastics in waterways, soils, kaimoana and drinking water; reducing pollution from major sources such as synthetic textiles and tyre wear; and funding clean-ups, wetland restoration and stormwater improvements to prevent plastic reaching rivers and the sea.