

Defending Freshwater Policy – How you can help

This information sheet will help you attend your local public meeting to defend strong freshwater rules. Our goal is to speak up for a healthy environment and balance industry voices.

The Government has proposed changes to the national freshwater policy, and introduced new national standards on agricultural intensification. Below is information on what Forest & Bird supports and opposes from their proposals, along with questions and statements you can use to make a real impact.

Farm environment plans

This is our major concern. Farm environment plans are presented as a possible option as a form of self-regulation – this should be outright rejected. We need to strongly oppose any plans for self-regulation and instead support strong regulation options. Self-regulation will clearly be preferred by industry over the possibility of stronger regulation.

Wetlands

For the first time wetlands will receive detailed protection in the national policy on freshwater though there are a couple reservations.

- Forestry would be exempt from wetland provisions in the new standards. Why is this?
- Wetland monitoring only applies to new consents. What about all the other wetlands?
- Wetland protection is proposed for bigger than 500 sq. meters. What about the smaller wetlands?

Winter Grazing

This practice can be very harmful to the environment.

- Intensive winter grazing has been defined as grazing on forage crops which excludes pasture. Many of the issues we see in Southland are a result of break-feeding on pasture, this is why ‘pasture’ must be included in the definition.
- The intensive winter grazing rules are absolutely inadequate. A 30 hectare threshold is too high, an acceptable pugging depth of 20 centimetres is too deep, and the vegetated strip width proposed is too low.

Stock Exclusion

It is good to finally see national standards on stock exclusion.

- The exclusions though only apply to streams bigger than 1 metre wide. There will be critical areas that receive large amounts of pollution that are smaller than 1 metre. There needs to be provisions to protect these ‘critical source areas’.
- The setback distance of 5 metres from a waterway is not enough. This number is plucked out of the sky with no ecological significance. The setback should be more.
- There should be a requirement for any setback distance from a waterway to be vegetated, weed free and not grazed. A bare patch of land won’t hold back pollution from running over into the waterway.

Swimming

We are pleased with the safe levels of E.coli during the bathing season. This is a significant change that will protect human health.

- We noted that ‘bathing season’ is not defined in documents. Also, what about the rest of the year when other recreation takes place, like paddling, boating and fishing?
- We are also concerned councils are left to define what is and isn’t a primary contact site (i.e. a swimming site). This could mean that a contaminated site remains unfit for swimming or other recreation. We want to see tracking of E.coli at all the sites they already monitor and more.

Hydro-electricity

Yet another exemption for hydro-schemes. We don't think rivers with hydro-electric dams should be exempt from meeting the national regulations on water quality.

Fish Passage

- It is great to see provisions on fish passage in the new standards, though it only applies to new structures – what about existing structures? There needs to be an additional clause which required councils to make a plan and inventory existing structures with a timeline of alleviation.
- It should be a requirement for land owners to identify existing culverts on their land.

Action plans

These don't have any teeth. Regional councils will be required to do them, but action plans have not been defined, and there is no requirement to accomplish the actions and achieve freshwater improvements. Where is the guidance and accountability?

Values

These would be the values councils must protect. Ecosystem health, human contact, threatened species, and mahinga kai have been identified as potential compulsory values. We support these compulsory values.

Pollution Limits

- Sedimentation – this is a new measurement. It is important for our native freshwater fish. High sediment clogs the rocky spaces where fish live, and encourages algal growth which kills the oxygen they need to breath.
- Nitrogen (DIN) – for the first time the national bottom line is realistic at supporting a healthy ecosystem. Previous limits represented toxicity. We like the new limits.
- New measurements on fish, submerged plants (native and invasive), lake bottom dissolved oxygen, and ecosystem metabolism mean councils will have to keep track of the whole waterbody and determine if it supports ecological health. This is so important.
- Macroinvertebrate Community Index (MCI) previously was 80 as the lower level, we are pleased it is now 90. Ecologists say this is a better threshold for flagging decline before it's too late.

Question to ask:

- Why is forestry exempt from wetland protection? Why is hydro-electricity exempt from water quality?
- What is the plan with Action Plans? Where is the guidance, consistency and accountability for success?
- Given the serious impacts of winter grazing, why are proposals allowing such big areas with small setbacks?

One-liner you might say:

- To protect what we love, we need strong rules - no more half measures and no more polluter controlled self-regulation.
- New Zealanders love their swimming holes, fish, and birds, and want to protect them, but right now our fresh water is in crisis.
- Rules on pollution are currently too weak – allowing too many cows, too much fertilizer, and too much wetland and habitat destruction.
- Strong rules are the only way to achieve clean and healthy waterways.
- Fencing, planting and farm plans are not enough on their own – they have failed to reverse the freshwater crisis.
- There are farmers across NZ that are already farming sustainably and still making a profit; it is time for the rest to catch up.
- We need to think of the New Zealand brand with farming producing value added products like organics which carry a premium.
- Cheap milk powder brings more cows, more irrigation and more pollution – and it hasn't done well for sustained profit either.
- If we don't do this now we are leaving a massive debt to the next generations.
- New Zealand farming has a strong history of adapting to change, this is no different.
- We have no option but to shift to sustainable practices in the future.¹

[Click here to read a fact sheet on freshwater issues prepared by four Environment NGOs.](#)

¹ See consultation documents: <http://bit.ly/water-documents-mfe>
See meeting schedule for updates: <http://bit.ly/watermeeting>
See Facebook: <http://bit.ly/facebook-mfe-water>