



Focusing Aotearoa New Zealand's environmental reporting system

Frequently asked questions

What is this report about?

This report reviews how well Aotearoa New Zealand reports on the state of its environment. It critiques the approach to reporting set up under the Environmental Reporting Act 2015 and outlines steps the Government needs to take to improve the system. These improvements will help ensure that the stewardship of our environment is focused in the right places.

Why did the Commissioner decide to undertake this investigation?

The Commissioner has a statutory role to comment on the reports produced under the Environmental Reporting Act. The completion of the first full cycle of reports under the Act, in April 2019, provided a timely opportunity to review the entire system in detail and recommend improvements.

What were the main findings?

The Commissioner's review highlighted significant shortcomings.

Firstly, huge gaps in environmental data and knowledge bedevil our understanding. This is in stark contrast with our economy where we are much more reliably informed. In addition, the entire system is fragmented – multiple pieces of legislation create a mosaic of requirements, with often unclear responsibilities across organisations. Inconsistencies in how data is collected and analysed make it hard to construct a reliable national picture. These problems are compounded by a science funding system that does not properly recognise the importance of routine data collection.

Secondly, the Environmental Reporting Act lacks a clear purpose. This contributes to a lack of focus.

Finally, there is no plan or commitment to gather new data. The system was designed to make do with whatever information happens to be available. This 'passive harvest' approach is inadequate to inform the stewardship of our environment.

Why is this important? What do these gaps mean for New Zealand?

The shortcomings of New Zealand's broader environmental data and knowledge system mean that we do not have a clear national picture of the state of our environment – and whether it is getting better or worse. In particular, New Zealand lacks consistent, authoritative time-series data and comprehensive spatial coverage. Every year we delay the collection of data in an area identified as a significant gap, we commit New Zealand to flying blind in that area. A lack of time series in respect of some environmental pressure points could be costing us in the form of poorly designed policies or irreversible environmental damage.

But the costs are not just environmental – they have real consequences for the economy, society and our wellbeing. We cannot make economically efficient or socially fair environmental rules if we cannot measure authoritatively what is happening to the physical resource base on which our wellbeing ultimately depends.

What is an example of a significant gap?

The last national survey of land cover in New Zealand was undertaken in 2012. Land use can change even more quickly than land cover. However, despite being a land-based economy, New Zealand has no robust, comprehensive and nationally representative land use map, let alone one that is regularly updated. Current estimates have been cobbled together from a variety of sources and proxies.

What has the Commissioner recommended?

The review outlines steps the Government needs to take to improve national environmental reporting. These improvements will help ensure that the stewardship of our environment is focused in the right places. The Commissioner does not propose fundamental upheaval. Rather, he recommends building on previous efforts to improve environmental reporting.

Specifically, the Commissioner recommends amending the Environmental Reporting Act as follows:

- adding a clearer purpose
- establishing a standing science advisory panel
- developing core environmental indicators to form the backbone of reporting and drive more active and consistent data gathering
- focusing the system on what matters – retaining state of the environment (synthesis) reports and replacing domain reports with flexible, theme-based commentaries
- expanding the reporting framework
- requiring a formal response from the Government to state of the environment reports.

The Commissioner also recommends adjusting the roles of the Government Statistician and the Secretary for the Environment.

To improve the evidence base underpinning the environmental reporting system, the Commissioner recommends developing a comprehensive, nationally coordinated environmental monitoring system. In addition, he calls for a mandated strategy to prioritise and incrementally fill data gaps.

What is required to make these changes?

Serious investment is needed to improve our evidence-base. But investment needs to be focused on what matters most. Any efforts to prioritise requires expertise – one of the reasons the Commissioner is recommending an independent standing science advisory panel. He recommends that the Ministers of Finance, Environment and Statistics determine the investment required to deliver the recommended improvements over a period of years.