



A review of the funding and prioritisation of environmental research in New Zealand

Frequently asked questions

What is this report about?

This report examines how public funds are invested in environmental research in New Zealand. The Commissioner found that our current public investment in environmental research is fragmented, which makes it harder to respond to the many environmental challenges New Zealand faces.

The Commissioner has proposed a dedicated environmental research funding system guided by people who understand the nation's environmental research capability and needs.

What is environmental research and why do we need to fund it?

Environmental research includes the collection, modelling and interpretation of data about the natural environment to understand how it works, how it responds to change and how to prevent future harm. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this needs to embrace mātauranga Māori.

Environmental research can help us address our most pressing environmental issues. As fixing environmental problems tends to be in the public good, it falls largely to the Government to fund this work.

How do collections and databases fit into the funding landscape?

Consistent, long-term funding is needed to gather, curate and make sense of environmental data. From monitoring atmospheric gas to track our changing climate, to collecting samples of microalgae cultures to help safeguard our food and environment, to describing and naming New Zealand's living things, key datasets provide vital information for New Zealand's health, economy, environment and society.

But New Zealand's collections and databases have been chronically underfunded for years, and the long-term nature of this type of environmental research is not suited to winning grants from competitive funding mechanisms.

Why did the Commissioner decide to undertake this investigation?

The Commissioner's 2019 investigation into environmental reporting identified significant knowledge gaps about the changing state of our environment.

As knowledge gaps often happen because of a lack of funding or strategy, the Commissioner decided to investigate New Zealand's environmental research funding system to determine why such gaps were occurring and how they could be filled.

How much public money is currently being spent on environmental research?

No one exactly knows. And trying to find out proved more difficult than expected.

There is no authoritative figure for the amount of publicly funded money spent on environmental research in New Zealand, nor is a single agency responsible for guiding this investment.

Instead there are multiple avenues of funding from many different sources, with some funds freely contestable and some negotiated between the Crown and the provider.

Data collected from a range of central and local government agencies for 2018/19 – the only financial year for which such comprehensive mapping was possible – showed that between \$427 and \$516 million was spent on environmental research in New Zealand. The figures vary depending on what is or is not included as environmental research.

Does the current system work?

The Commissioner believes there should be a strong link between the Government's environmental priorities – such as freshwater quality or biodiversity loss – and the research it spends public money on.

While much excellent research is undoubtedly being done, the investigation found there is a disconnect between the types of environmental research many governmental documents say is of strategic importance and the actual research investments that are made.

What does the Commissioner recommend?

The Commissioner proposes a new funding system that ringfences environmental research funding from the money central government already spends on environmental research – \$255 million, on a conservative estimate.

This dedicated, long-term funding would be explicitly linked to an environmental research strategy led by the Ministry for the Environment.

The Commissioner sets out two possible models for how to allocate and oversee this funding.

The first model proposes no new entities and seeks to promote change within current institutional frameworks, with more connection between the agencies managing the environment (such as the Ministry for the Environment, Ministry for Primary Industries and Department of Conservation) and those allocating the funding (mainly the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment).

The second (preferred) model proposes the establishment of an independent, dedicated funding agency in the form of an Environmental Research Council. The council would be run by specialist staff with strong experience in environmental science and mātauranga Māori who would use the environmental research strategy to develop platforms of research in consultation with ministries and relevant industries.

What wouldn't the funding be used for?

The fund would not be available to central or regional government agencies seeking to support their operational research, regardless of whether it is directed towards environmental monitoring or any other policy or delivery role. Such research should be a part of their core operating business.

Likewise, the system would not focus on blue-skies environmental research – funding for this would still be available via contestable funds, such as the Marsden Fund.