



Hon Damien O'Connor  
Minister for Biosecurity  
Parliament Buildings, Wellington

13 February 2023

RE: the future of the National Wilding Conifer Control Programme.

Dear Minister,

I am writing to express my concern about the future of the National Wilding Conifer Control Programme.

As you know, \$100 million was secured as part of Budget 2020 to enable wilding conifer control operations to expand into many new areas. As I understand it, the aim of the investment was to expand control efforts into new areas and set us on a path towards effectively containing or eliminating established wilding conifer infestations by 2030.

I have now learned that the programme's annual budget will fall from \$25 million this year (2022/23) to just \$10 million from July onwards. This will place at risk the gains that have been made in newly controlled areas and end any hopes of achieving containment or elimination at the scale envisaged back in 2020. It is my understanding that the programme requires at least \$25 million per annum simply to maintain the gains made so far.

The control of invasive species cannot be an on-again, off-again affair. The reason we face a problem on this scale is a direct result of decades of neglect by successive governments. Land that could have been controlled at a cost of low tens of dollars per hectare now costs hundreds and in some cases thousands of dollars per hectare to bring under control. Reining in the investment after it has barely been ramped up risks losing any gains that may have been made and wasting taxpayers' money. I am at a loss to understand how this programme will now be able to meet its objectives.

In light of what appears to be a serious retrenchment can you and your officials please provide answers to the following questions:

- What impact will the reduction in funding to \$10 million per annum for 2023/24 and consecutive years have on the area of land currently under control?
- How much of the previously controlled land is at risk of being abandoned in the long-term because there is insufficient funding to complete follow-up control?
- How much money has been spent controlling these at-risk areas to date?

It is more than a year now since I completed a major investigation into the management of weeds that threaten our native ecosystems. I will be writing to you separately by way of follow-up since little seems to have happened. But it's worth recalling here that wilding conifers pose a significant threat to some of our most at-risk ecosystems.

My *Space Invaders* report was able to point to the National Wilding Conifer Control Programme as a rare case of serious leadership being provided by the Director-General of MPI in respect of plants that pose a risk to native ecosystems. There were of course myriad

other supporting justifications for the programme which independent analysis from 2018 suggested delivers benefit to cost ratios of 38:1. Now even this bright spot has been extinguished.

The fate of the wilding conifer programme further confirms my view that the current management and leadership of biosecurity in New Zealand is falling seriously short when it comes to plant pests already established here. I would urge you to take a look at the National Wilding Conifer Control Programme and think about whether the proposed cuts to the programme are in the public interest and, indeed, consistent with the purpose and responsibilities outlined in relevant sections of the Biosecurity Act 1993.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Upton', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Simon Upton  
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

Cc: Hon Willow-Jean Prime, Minister of Conservation

Cc: Hon David Parker, Minister for the Environment

Cc: Hon James Shaw, Minister of Climate Change