



# The state of New Zealand's environment: Commentary by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment on *Environment Aotearoa 2015*

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is this report about?

It is a commentary by the Commissioner on *Environment Aotearoa 2015* – the state of the environment report published last year by the Ministry for the Environment and Statistics New Zealand. The Commissioner's commentary begins with a review of that report. It then presents the Commissioner's take on the state of New Zealand's environment and identifies priority issues that stand out for particular attention.

### What is the state of New Zealand's environment?

The Commissioner gives the state of our environment a mixed report card. She found that climate change is by far the most serious environmental issue. Already temperatures are increasing, the ocean is acidifying, and the sea is rising.

On other issues, she found that:

- while water quality is good in forested areas, it is poor in many lowland places,
- our native plants and animals are losing the war against pests,
- we still have huge areas of eroding hill country,
- our oceans are under pressure from run-off and fishing, although the greatest pressure in the long-term is acidification and warming from climate change,
- in contrast, the outlook for air quality is good – it looks set to continue improving.

### What should be done in response to this report?

The Commissioner has recommended a formal response analysing options for how to act on the findings of *Environment Aotearoa 2015* and her commentary. She notes four areas that stand out as needing particular attention:

- reducing transport emissions to create low carbon cities,
- establishing more marine protected areas to protect precious parts of our oceans,
- reforesting eroding hills to protect soil and reduce sediment in rivers, and
- figuring out how to win the war against the predators killing native birds and animals.

## **Why has the Commissioner issued this commentary?**

Under the Environmental Reporting Act 2015, the Ministry for the Environment and Statistics New Zealand must produce a report every six months on one of five domains – air, water, marine, land and atmosphere – and a synthesis report covering all five every three years. Under the Act, the Commissioner may comment, at his or her discretion, “*on an environmental report and the processes that produced it*”. Following the passage of the Act, officials produced a synthesis report titled *Environment Aotearoa 2015* in October last year, and the Commissioner has now released her commentary on it.

## **What was the Commissioner’s assessment of *Environment Aotearoa 2015*?**

The Commissioner commended the Ministry for the Environment and Statistics New Zealand on what they have achieved in a limited amount of time. There will never be a perfect state of the environment report – the task is too wide-ranging and the available data sets will always be inadequate in some way. The challenge therefore is one of incremental improvement and the Commissioner has recommended eight areas for improvement.

## **Is the Government doing enough to look after our environment?**

The Government has made progress in a number of areas such as water quality. But like all countries, New Zealand faces big environmental challenges. Reports on the state of our environment help us set priorities for action. Areas that stand out as needing particular attention from the Government are moving to low carbon cities, creating marine protected areas, reforesting eroding land, and winning the war against pests.

## **Who is causing the most environmental damage?**

The causes of environmental damage are many and varied. Whatever we do with the land has effects on the environment. In urban areas, the steady rise of greenhouse gas emissions from transport stands out for particular attention. Agriculture is a huge part of our economy and has a big impact in much of the country. One of our biggest environmental problems is the legacy of erosion we have inherited across much of the country – caused by bush clearance on unstable soils by long ago farmers who believed they were doing the right thing. In protected conservation lands, we are fighting a war against predators such as possums, rats and stoats.

## **What can we do to fight climate change?**

One big challenge for New Zealand is transport emissions. We need to work towards making our cities low-carbon as well as affordable. Another major challenge is greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture. The Commissioner’s next report will be on the agricultural greenhouse gases. Tackling climate change will involve bold leadership from the Government.

## **Which councils are doing the best or worst job of looking after their patch?**

Both *Environment Aotearoa 2015* and the Commissioner’s commentary assessed the environment at a national level. This did not include a comparison of the performance of different regional councils. However, the Commissioner has stressed that reports in the future should provide more information on *where* different issues are significant and where they are not. Another benefit of the new reporting system is that it will drive more consistent measurement and monitoring of the environment across the country.