



**Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment**

Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata

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19 July 2024

**Hon Tama Potaka**

Minister of Conservation

**Hon Andrew Hoggard**

Minister of Biosecurity

By email

Subject: Briefing for Incoming Ministers from the Chief Executives of the Department of Conservation and the Ministry for Primary Industries

Dear Ministers

On arriving in office, you received a Briefing for Incoming Ministers (BIM) from the Chief Executives of the Department of Conservation (DOC) and the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) regarding your respective portfolios<sup>1</sup>. These BIMs provided an overview of key issues likely to confront you as an incoming minister. Given the importance of these briefings, I took it on myself to write to the Chief Executives of several central government agencies prior to the October general election to emphasise a number of critical issues that, from the point of view of my mandate, I believed should be included in the BIM.

Among these issues, I view the threat posed to New Zealand's native ecosystems by weeds as one of the most pressing. Weeds are a perennial problem, not a new one, yet they remain all too often ignored. Not many New Zealanders see weeds as a priority, but I can assure you that they pose as big a threat to native biodiversity as mammalian pests. The fact that weeds don't have four legs and two eyes and lend themselves to striking photography doesn't make them any less serious a problem.

I was therefore disappointed not to see the importance of terrestrial weeds raised, let alone any meaningful actions proposed in the BIMs from either DOC or MPI. While both BIMs mention the word "weeds", the BIMs do not provide an indication of the impacts caused by the issue, management actions being taken or associated challenges.

In November 2021, I published a report titled "Space Invaders: A Review of How New Zealand Manages Weeds that Threaten Native Ecosystems," which details how weeds have become a

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Penny Nelson 10 August 2023; Letter to Ray Smith 10 August 2023

pervasive and urgent critical issue for our native ecosystems.<sup>2</sup> The report demonstrates that one key reason for this problem is fragmented leadership and insufficient resources. Primary responsibility for biosecurity including weed management rests with MPI, while DOC is NZ's biodiversity steward and regional councils across the country are on the front line of leading the biosecurity response to weeds to the extent that there is one.

Since the publication of my report, officials have taken some modest steps regarding the problem posed by weeds, but these are far from sufficient to effectively address the issue. The need for a coordinated and strategic approach to improve weed information systems, monitoring, and surveillance should remain a priority if we are to make a difference. Without prioritising this issue, the problem will become increasingly expensive and cause irreversible damage to our endemic flora and ecosystems. A fully joined-up and strategic approach is essential, yet it remains lacking.

I have spent some years now being assured that the Biosecurity Act is under review. These assurances are starting to wear thin. I appreciate that funds are scarce. But there are practical low-cost things that could be done to improve coordination, prioritisation and, crucially, information sharing without waiting for legislative wheels to grind glacially on. The changes needed to the Biosecurity Act and its implementation will strengthen the management of all pests and biosecurity risks, not just weeds. But you do not need to wait for that review. Already, in the six months or so that you have been in office, it is likely that another ten introduced plants will have naturalised in the wild.

The steps that need to be taken have been spelt out in my report. But they will not be taken unless you as Ministers indicate that you are not satisfied with the status quo. As long as you leave the current system unchanged, this constantly rising tide of weediness will continue. If there is any good news, it is that there are community groups ready and waiting to respond to better leadership from central government.

I would like to meet with you jointly to ascertain what can be done to make a difference.

Yours sincerely,



Rt Hon Simon Upton  
**Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment**  
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Cc. Penny Nelson, Department of Conservation  
Ray Smith, Ministry of Primary Industries

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<sup>2</sup> <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/space-invaders-managing-weeds-that-threaten-native-ecosystems/>

