



Minister for the Environment
Minister of Climate Change
Minister of Conservation
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

17 May 2024

Dear Ministers

I am writing to ensure that you are aware of the potential significance of recently announced job cuts at the National Institute of Water & Atmospheric Research (NIWA). They will negatively impact on your portfolios. Some of the cuts announced affect researchers in marine biodiversity, others affect climate modelling and physical oceanography. I would encourage you to ask some questions about what is going on here and whether it aligns with your portfolio priorities.

With respect to marine biodiversity, New Zealand possesses, as you know, high levels of endemism - species found here and not anywhere else in the world. Only New Zealand researchers can genuinely and convincingly study them on a long-term basis and for the benefit of all New Zealanders. If we cut our work force in this space, the research will simply not be done the way it needs to be done for New Zealand and mana whenua in particular.

Yet marine biodiversity work over the past decade has been critical to a number of areas including biosecurity, evaluating the impacts of fisheries and identifying high value marine areas for appropriate management, whether it be for conservation or not. The expertise required in any of these areas is specialised including taxonomic skills. We have made investments in people over decades that will be simply written off. Research capacity of this type is not sitting on a shelf waiting to be hired. When we need it again - and we will, for instance, to understand a marine biosecurity threat - it won't be available and will take decades to rebuild.

In the case of climate modellers, the argument is a little different but not dissimilar. While there may be plenty of climate modellers globally, we need researchers who are tuned to our particular needs. Our land-based economic sectors rely on an understanding of climate for their productivity and risk management. The Government needs to understand the risk climate poses to our society and economy as a whole. This is the great adaptation challenge which I know the Government is concerned about.

Part of our ability to adapt and respond to climate change will rely on modellers who can downscale global climate models to New Zealand's unique geographic and climatic circumstances. We also need to be able to understand the contribution to specific sectoral emissions such as what agricultural methane makes to global trends. This is important both for international negotiations and market access.

The timing of NIWA's announcements is curious. As far as I am aware, (and the Treasury has confirmed), CRIs have not been asked to make any specific budget cuts. One could be forgiven for wondering if NIWA's announcement of staff reductions at the same time that job cuts are being made in the core public service is an attempt to lose them in the noise.

Having said that, NIWA is required under the CRI Act to operate in a financially responsible manner so that it maintains its financial viability. It is not for Ministers to make direct operational decisions. On the other hand, NIWA is Crown-owned and the majority of its research funding comes from taxpayers to conduct public-good research – which most definitely extends to marine biodiversity and climate modelling.

Ministers are entitled to ask MBIE why they consider these cuts to be consistent with the Government's priorities for public good environmental research.

In my view, the Crown needs to be more directive on what its research funding is spent on. I am not suggesting that Ministers should be making those directions. The oscillation of short-term political priorities will do nothing to support stable long-term research which is so important to the environment.

Ideally, public research funding on the environment should be allocated by an expert body like an environmental research council, acting to implement long-term ministerial priorities. That is an issue for the medium-term reform of the science system and I will be making a submission to the Science System Advisory Group, led by Sir Peter Gluckman, along these lines. I encourage you to engage with your colleague the Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology on this issue as well.

In the short-term, I suggest you ask your ministries to work more closely with MBIE to ensure the Government's medium- and long-term environmental research priorities are more adequately reflected in the research that all CRIs, NIWA included, undertake. That might, for example, mean MfE and DOC, being actively involved in the renegotiation of environment-related Strategic Science Investment Funding (SSIF) when the contracts are next up for negotiation, as well as being involved in decisions on Endeavour funding (where the environment is concerned).

In my view you should be concerned that core expertise is being jettisoned without any apparent regard for the nation's long term environmental interests for which you are responsible.

Yours sincerely



Rt Hon Simon Upton
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata

cc. Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology
Chairperson, NIWA Board (Barry Harris)