Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment
Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata

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Hon. Dr. Shane Reti

Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology

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7 March 2025

Dear Minister

Thank you for your letter of 28th February replying to mine of 7th February.

I was dismayed that neither the material you provided, nor your letter, gave any hint that the future conduct of environmental research has been considered in the restructuring of CRIs into PROs that has been initiated.

It is clear from your own letter that the only rationale for this reorganisation is economic – you talk of 'driving economic growth', 'seeing more science commercialised and applied', enhancing 'commercial impacts' and supporting 'economic growth and stewardship, including environmental stewardship' – these last two words being the only passing reference to the subject matter of my letter.

I had hoped for a better account of how environmental research will be secured as this reorganisation proceeds. After all, one of the Crown's core functions is public good research – in other words, research that is commissioned to yield a public good. The case for subsidising research that generates economic benefits that will be captured privately, is a contested one. But environmental research, focused on publicly managed resources such as air, water, soil and biota has traditionally been regarded as a classic responsibility of governments. It appears that this justification may now have been discarded.

My interest is not academic. One of my functions, set out in section 16(1)(f) of the Environment Act 1986, is to undertake and encourage the collection and dissemination of information relating to the environment. I consider the Government's network of CRIs, and the work they are funded to do, a critical part of our ability to manage the environment, including the collection and dissemination of information. The question I have is whether the preservation of this capability has even been considered in the context of this reform, and if it has, how it will be reflected. In line with the mandate I refer to above, I am encouraging you to ensure that the collection and dissemination of information derived from environmental research continues.

Your reply informs me that you have received "no advice on the detailed implications of the proposed mergers for Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research staff, and its data and collection." I am advised further by your office that you have received no additional advice on the matters that I have raised with you in my letter of 7th February. This is despite the briefing paper of 14th August 2024 noting that the Minister will need to consider implementation pathways and governance options, with further advice to be provided by officials in that regard.

Two questions arise:

- Is the briefing you forwarded, dated 14th August 2024, the last time there has been any advice tendered on the reorganisation that might be relevant to my interest in the collection and dissemination of information relating to the environment? Please note that whilst my earlier letter to you focused on Landcare (where I believe some of the most significant challenges arise), environmental research is conducted in almost all CRIs,

- Have you, since my letter of 7th February, sought any advice on the consequences of the reorganisation for the conduct of environmental research and the curation of environmentally critical data sets?

I will in due course be reporting my assessment of the consequences of the CRI reorganisation to Parliament. It is essential that I can accurately describe the way in which environmental research has been considered in the reorganisation process and the likely consequences of the reorganisation for its delivery.

Yours sincerely

Simon Upton

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