



Hon Dr Shane Reti
Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology
Parliament Buildings
Private Bag 18041
Wellington 6160

By email to S.Reti@ministers.govt.nz

25 September 2025

Re. 2025 Endeavour Fund round and science prioritisation

Dear Dr Reti

I am aware that decisions on future research prioritisation and funding are close to being made. In advance of our scheduled meeting on 14 October, I would like to share with you some of my concerns with the way environmental research is currently being prioritised and my fear that new arrangements may not represent any improvement.

As you will be aware, I have previously drawn similar concerns to the attention of the Prime Minister, and I am hoping that you will be in a position to respond to them.¹ There is probably no more crucial responsibility that falls to the Government in the environmental sector than research. That is not a popularly held view but for that very reason your engagement is critical.

The results of the 2025 round for the Endeavour Fund provide some useful insights about just what is at stake. Of the 154 bids submitted, just 19 were funded – a 12.3% success rate. While I'm sure the successful bids represent excellent research propositions, the almost desperate levels of bidding in relation to the funds available almost certainly means that valuable public good research opportunities are being passed over.

I took a look at some of the unsuccessful bids and was interested to see that among them was a proposal entitled, *Optimising surveillance to prevent economic and environmental harm from emerging weeds*. The proposal ("weed proposal") was developed by the former Manaaki Whenua Landcare Crown Research Institute. My interest arises from the substantial impacts invasive plants already have, and are likely to continue to have, on Aotearoa's environment. Having devoted considerable resources to drawing the seriousness of this problem to the Government's

¹ Letter of 17 March 2024, <https://pce.parliament.nz/publications/letter-to-pm-on-science-sector-reforms/>



attention (see my weeds report²), I feel well placed to offer it as an example of what must not be lightly dismissed in the context of changes to research funding in New Zealand.

I want to be clear that I am not challenging the decision not to fund this proposal. That would be to interfere with the independence of the assessment process, a principle that I believe should underpin any public science system. Rather, I have chosen it to illustrate problems with the current bidding approach to the Endeavour Fund, and the way research priorities are (or more accurately, are not) determined.

This was the third successive round in which the essence of this proposal was submitted. Each time, the team revised it in response to the limited feedback provided by MBIE. Interestingly, although it passed the "Excellence" stage in the first two rounds, it failed at that stage in the third. My impression is that this year the bidders may have over-emphasised the economic aspects of the research. One wonders if they did this out of a concern that the Government's priorities are now exclusively focused on economic growth.

This raises the broader question of how research is prioritised in New Zealand. This task has been assigned to the Prime Minister's Science Innovation and Technology Advisory Committee (PMSITAC). Since government resources will always be scarce, prioritisation is essential. New Zealand needs a clear and credible framework that accounts for our specific circumstances and balances short-, medium- and long-term needs. That framework needs to ensure that environmental research of a public good nature is firmly designated as a core governmental responsibility.

Responsibility for spelling out high level environmental research priorities needs to be informed by, at a minimum, the ministers for environment, biosecurity, conservation, primary industries and LINZ. Unlike some other domains, environmental research relates heavily to the public domain and requires a very long-term focus. We need to ensure that priorities endure, so that we can support the human capital needed to respond to challenges that unfold over many decades. To take the case of weeds – and biosecurity risks more generally – we know that they pose challenges that will never go away. It's akin to national security. We need a stable research funding base to support scientists working in these fields. While there is a place for contestable funding, I think we would both agree that competitive funding rounds uninformed by a prioritisation framework are unlikely to deliver the sort of long-term investments that something like invasive weeds require. The same is true for almost all the other domains of environmental research.

Once clearly stated, politicians should leave the actual allocation of resources to expert panels that can best judge how to ensure a good match between scientific excellence and getting the best value from the available resources to ensure that those long-run priorities are advanced. In my 2020 review of environmental research funding and prioritisation, I recommended establishing an Environmental Research Council whose role it would be to allocate funding independently of immediate political pressures, while still working within broad, politically defined priorities. Regardless of whether that is the best fit for your reforms, I am concerned that

² See my 2021 report, *Space Invaders: A review of how New Zealand manages weeds that threaten native ecosystems*.



there are no indications that any such framing for prioritisation of *public good* research is being seriously considered.³

I would be interested to hear your views on the ideas that are being canvased to ensure that we maintain a level of environmental research commensurate with the diverse, and in some cases intractable, environmental challenges we face, and how the Government intends to ensure prioritisation processes that adequately reflect long-term environmental needs.

From announcements to date, it appears increasingly likely that critical research challenges such as those raised by invasive weeds – and this is just one challenge among many – will be deprioritised in favour of exciting commercial research that can be labelled ‘good for growth’.

Public good research is not without economic value, but that value will often be in avoided future costs. In the case of the weeds proposal, one issue is the future burden landowners and the Crown alike will confront if we don’t develop a better understanding of how to manage bio-invasions. For example, being able to control wilding conifers can keep land productive, reduce fire risk and preserve water flows for hydro power and irrigation.⁴ A different range of benefits to farming and tourism depends on our ability to control other species. But to do so effectively (and at least cost) requires good research-based knowledge.

I look forward to discussing with you how the Government’s new priority-setting and funding mechanisms will ensure that public-good research capability, such as environmental research, is maintained and enhanced.

Yours sincerely

Rt Hon Simon Upton

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

³ PCE, 2020. *A review of the funding and prioritisation of environmental research in New Zealand*.

⁴ <https://www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/58519-2022-Benefits-and-costs-of-additional-investment-inwilding-conifer-control/>