



Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

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Dear Ministers,

Over two years have passed since I released my report *Focusing Aotearoa New Zealand's environmental reporting system* and outlined the steps the Government needs to take to improve the system.

I am concerned that there has been little progress in implementing my recommendations. This delay hinders our ability to judge with any confidence whether we are targeting scarce resources on the right issues and whether what we are doing is making a difference.

I am concerned that we are yet to see any amendments to the Environmental Reporting Act 2015, despite my 2019 review recommending nine targeted amendments to the Act, replete with drafting suggestions. I am advised that public consultation on a discussion document has now been approved to begin early in the new year. I am at something of a loss to understand why it has taken over two years to get to the stage of issuing a discussion document – and even why we need one.

Of course, there is a need to talk to those who are most immediately engaged in data collection and monitoring (the regional councils in particular). But at the rate we are going, we risk not achieving any changes within the term of the current Parliament – notwithstanding the fact that there appears, for the moment, to be general agreement that the improvements I have proposed are desirable. Without legislative change, New Zealand will continue on the current treadmill of reporting based as it is on the largely passive harvest of data we happen to have.

Authoritative environmental information is the foundation of robust evidence-based decision making. We need reports that draw on comprehensive time-series data and identify meaningful trends to help achieve effective stewardship of the environment. That will not be possible without a sustained, multi-year investment. If done properly, it is an investment that should more than pay for itself by ensuring that we invest in initiatives that will make a real difference for the environment, the economy and society.

I am aware that in Budget 2021, the Government committed \$25 million to establish an “enduring environmental monitoring and reporting system”. However, this spending is

narrowly focused on targets and limits as part of the resource management reform. Significant further work will be needed in the years to come to fully devise and run an effective monitoring system for the environment. I am disappointed that an investment case as recommended in 2019 has not yet been prepared.

Given that environmental data, research into our knowledge gaps, and the use to which both are put in seeking to prioritise environmental investments are inextricably linked, there should be no further delay in improving New Zealand's environment reporting system.

I hope you will be able to introduce the necessary amendments to the Environmental Reporting Act 2015 in the near future. Just as importantly, legislative amendments need to be matched with budgetary provisions on a multi-year basis that will ensure the development of a comprehensive environmental monitoring system. We need one that yields data on which spending decisions can rely and against which the effectiveness of that spending can be judged.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'S' followed by a vertical line and a small horizontal stroke at the top.

Rt Hon Simon Upton
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment