

## Issue 13.6

### MAKING RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DECISIONS UNDER UNCERTAINTY

The processes of developing resource management policy and considering resource use proposals rely on sufficient relevant and reliable information in order to reach decisions that are justified and in accordance with the promotion of sustainable management. In some situations, an adequate amount of information may not be available. Best information may indicate a possible risk, as well as the likely benefits associated with some course of action; but the nature, size and likelihood of the risk is uncertain. This situation may be because the information does not exist, the understanding of the risk is poor or the known situation is very complex.

The Act recognises that uncertainty exists, by imposing functions and duties to collect environmental information and to avoid, remedy or mitigate adverse effects of activities on the environment. Effects include cumulative effects and risks.

A rational response to uncertainty is to be cautious in decision-making, especially when there is an indication that significant risks may be involved. A precautionary approach to decision making has been recognised as an appropriate response in the face of uncertainty by the United Nations in Agenda 21, by the Government in environmental management publications and by other councils in New Zealand, despite the fact that the concept is not expressly stated in the Act.

In adopting a cautious approach, there is a need to carefully balance expected benefits and possible risks, on the basis of all available information. The approach presumes that decisions should avoid or reduce the identified risk, but with every decision under such an approach, the Council would need to judge:

- (a) whether it has enough information about the risk to warrant being cautious;
- (b) whether the risk is of such a kind that action should be taken to avoid or reduce it, regardless of the expected benefits;
- (c) what decision is most appropriate; for example, more stringent regulation or more environmental information.

Adopting a cautious approach may provide additional information about any proposed action that assists in answering the above questions. However, the approach may unnecessarily inhibit resource use or it may transfer a risk to another part of the environment or to another time. There is a need to exercise careful judgement in applying the approach to the requirements of the Act and the facts of the situation. Commitment to such an approach must be consistent but also responsive to the issues of whether it applies in any particular situation, and how then it is to be applied.

## Policy 13.7

The Council will adopt a cautious approach to making decisions on plans and consent applications that:

- (a) seeks and utilises all relevant available information; and
- (b) acknowledges uncertainty or inadequacy in the information available about any potential adverse effect (or risk) of activities, including information about the type and level of risk; and
- (c) establishes whether any risk is able to be remedied or mitigated to an acceptable degree or is of a type that must be avoided; and
- (d) ensures that the need for further information about any risk is considered when making judgements under (c) above; and

- (e) results in decisions that are responsive to new information about effects and risks.

**EXPLANATION AND REASONS:**

The Council may have to make decisions on plans or consents where there is inadequate information about the likely effects of proposals or activities, or where the information suggests that there are potential adverse effects (or risks). The Council will acknowledge whenever these uncertainties are present. It will consider whether it can obtain further information, or whether any potential adverse effect can be avoided or reduced to an acceptable degree. The Council recognises the role of further information when making its decisions.

**METHODS OF IMPLEMENTATION:**

- (i) The Council will develop policies and rules in its resource management plans and make decisions on resource consents that follow the precautionary approach where information suggests that the approach specified in this policy should be followed.

**ANTICIPATED ENVIRONMENTAL RESULTS:**

- (i) Use of resources to an extent and in a manner consistent with the existence and understanding of information about the potential adverse effects of such use.

**PERFORMANCE MONITORING INDICATORS:**

- (i) Assessed degree of consistency between:
  - (a) the extent of regulation of activities; and
  - (b) knowledge of the existence of potential adverse effects of such activities; and
  - (c) the degree of understanding of the potential adverse effects, particularly of their irreversibility.

