



Factsheets for Estimates 2019/2020

Urban water and the Three Waters review

This is part of a series of fact sheets prepared for the Environment Committee's 2019/20 Estimates examination of Vote Environment.

The Ministry for the Environment leads policy advice to improve the health of freshwater bodies in urban environments. As part of the Department of Internal Affairs-led Three Waters review, the Ministry is also leading the development of proposals to improve the environmental regulation of waste water and stormwater systems, and drinking water sources.

Challenges of urban growth and development practices

Urban water bodies are highly valued ecosystems that can provide refuge to some of our most threatened species, but they can be degraded by activities we undertake in the urban environment. Large areas of impervious surfaces such as roofs, roads, and pavements can create extreme changes in flow conditions, which affect the habitats of freshwater species and can contribute to flooding.

Stormwater run-off from towns and cities carries contaminants such as pesticides, heavy metals and litter into the waterways. Urban growth and subdivision can lead to the loss of our waterways to culverting, diversions and reclamations. Earthworks can pollute streams with sediment, making them unliveable for many native plants and animals.

Almost all of New Zealand's population growth is and will continue to be in urban areas. Urban development, done well, can provide opportunities to enhance rather than degrade our freshwater and coastal environments. Increased connections to urban water bodies can also provide benefits to community well-being.

Working collaboratively

The Ministry is supporting council and industry professionals (the Urban Water Working Group) to develop their independent proposals for how the Government could support improved urban water management in the future. This expert group is currently working to outline national good practice guidance and explore a wide range of forward-thinking policy options.

The Three Waters Review

The Three Waters Review programme is considering options for improving regulatory and service delivery arrangements for drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater services (Three Waters). The programme seeks to ensure that all New Zealanders and visitors have access to safe, reliable drinking water, and to improve the environmental performance of wastewater and stormwater services.

The Three Waters Review programme is a multi-agency undertaking led by the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) and including the Ministry of Health and the Ministry for the Environment. The Ministry for the Environment's input is focused on supporting the development of regulatory proposals to improve the environmental regulation of wastewater and stormwater services, and regulation related to drinking water source protection.

The Ministry for the Environment has also sought to ensure alignment with the Essential Freshwater programme, ensuring Three Waters regulatory reform contributes to upholding Te Mana o te Wai.

The regulatory proposals are largely directed at infrastructure operators and service providers (who are primarily city and district councils). However, some of the proposals will also have implications for both rural and urban land use decisions (ie, stronger regulation of land-use activities in drinking water source protection areas).

Essential Freshwater programme

The Government's Essential Freshwater work programme involves a package of regulatory changes under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) including a National Policy Statement (NPS), National Environmental Standard (NES), regulations under section 360 and some amendments to the RMA.

The work programme is intended to stop further degradation and loss and begin reversing past damage, in rural and urban environments. In developing a comprehensive package of reform proposals the Ministry has been considering options for halting the degradation of water bodies in urban environments, and improving the management of urban water.

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Published in July 2019 by the
Ministry for the Environment
Publication number: INFO 907



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