Kia ora,

This is a submission on the national freshwater policy statement, made on behalf of Forest and Bird Christchurch. As an organization, we focus on engaging youth in environmental issues and providing a youth voice for nature. We see fresh water as both a crucial resource for human life, and a home for many species of flora and fauna, some unique to New Zealand. As a group, we have participated in events such as riparian plantings at Ōtukaikino and the Middlemost Mudfish project, which is restoring the habitat of the endangered Canterbury mudfish. Through these events, we have seen not only the issues facing our fresh water, but the scale of the effort required to fix it.

At the moment, our freshwater ecosystems are in danger. Many species endemic to these places are threatened, some are nationally critical. Wading birds such as the kakī or black stilt, freshwater fish and amphibians are facing habitat degradation and destruction, adding another blow to species that are already endangered. We demand that these species be conserved and protected from further water pollution and habitat destruction. A lot of rivers and other bodies of fresh water are no longer considered swimmable, and nitrate levels in Forest and Bird Youth Christchurch’s home region of Canterbury have been building up in our groundwater, serving as a potential health hazard that could affect the health of Cantabrians. We ask for stricter protections and more pressure on regional councils to defend our fresh water.

Our vision for the future of fresh water aligns with that of the Ministry for the Environment. We want security for freshwater ecosystems, sustainable use of water and clean water for everyone to enjoy drinking. We fully support the concept of Te Mana O Te Wai, and think that this will effectively guide the fresh water national policy statement. The hierarchy of water use is both sensible and functional, and will provide clear guidelines to regulatory bodies regarding the use of fresh water. We appreciate the fact that the rights of the water first and foremost go to the river itself, and the plants and animals that inhabit it. However, we want stronger protections for wetlands. Over 90% of New Zealand’s wetlands have been destroyed. Further habitat destruction threatens the flora and fauna that inhabit them, putting pressure on ecosystems that are already suffering the effects of land conversion. We support stronger protections for all of our wetlands, including those on private land, and we also believe that the forestry industry should not be exempt.
We believe that stronger time limits need to be built into the national policy statement. When presenting their plans, councils should have to provide both a deadline for their fresh water goals, and a timeline of how this will be achieved. The timelines should be set by each council, as different regions face different challenges regarding fresh water, but we believe that each council should have to provide a deadline for their goals, or even better, a timeline with their plans. This is so that councils achieving or surpassing their goals can be congratulated, and those who are more apathetic can be held to account.

We do not support farm plans and self-regulation in the farming sector. Industries have been allowed to self-regulate in the past, and we don’t believe that it is an efficient way to manage fresh water in regards to agricultural use and pollution. Instead, we support stronger regulations on nitrate levels, fencing stock and the intensification of farms.

As youth, we ask that this policy statement provide strong protections for our fresh water. We do not want to inherit water and ecosystems that have been degraded beyond repair. In conclusion, we support the fresh water national policy statement, but believe that greater accountability for councils and industry is required.

Sincerely,

Youth Leader