



11 February 2024

Hon Chris Bishop
Minister for RMA Reform
Private Bag 18041
Parliament Buildings
Wellington 6160

Cc: **Hon Penny Simmonds** (Minister for the Environment)
Hon Tama Potaka (Minister for Conservation)

Feedback on Changes to the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management

Tēnā koe Minister Bishop,

We seek to respond to your letter of 31 January 2024, specifically to provide feedback on the Government's plans to change the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management (NPS-FM).

By way of introduction, the New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society (NZFSS) is the key professional organisation for practitioners in freshwater resource management and science in our country. We have more than 550 members, representing diverse freshwater expertise and experience, from academics and researchers to council and iwi authority scientists and resource managers, to community catchment groups and NGOs. As a constituent body of Te Apārangi, the Royal Society of NZ, NZFSS must *"Take reasonable steps to prevent activities leading to significant avoidable or unjustified degradation of the environment, and where appropriate, contribute to improved conservation, protection and sustainability"*.

NZFSS has provided detailed submissions and feedback on iterations of freshwater resource management reform over many years, and we remain concerned with the widespread degraded state of ecosystem health and water quality in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many of our members have had a direct involvement in the development of the current NPS-FM, and many more are engaged in its implementation. We are therefore well placed not only to provide informed feedback, but also to contribute relevant science and expertise to future discussions about the proposed NPS-FM review.

The key points we seek to make at this early stage of the proposed change process are:

1. The NPS-FM (2020) is the culmination of a very long, scientifically supported, consultative process. This process commenced under a National Government, who also convened the Land and Water Forum that called for the development of this national policy. This has required a very significant investment of time and effort by MfE staff, scientists, partners and stakeholders. We are anxious that this effort is not wasted. We are also anxious that the anticipated gains for our freshwater systems are not delayed as the situation is already urgent.

2. Many of New Zealand's rivers, lakes, wetlands and aquifers are already significantly degraded and in an unhealthy state.^{1,2} Almost half of our monitored rivers and lakes are unsafe for swimming or human contact³ and it will require a sustained, significant effort before their quality will improve. While we acknowledge the importance of agriculture to all New Zealanders, the scientific community unanimously agrees that, unless we prioritise the health and well-being of freshwater above the immediate needs of people that waterbodies support, many freshwater systems will continue to degrade. Ultimately this will negatively impact us all, including those making their living from the land. Long term social, cultural and economic needs will be supported by prioritising the well-being of waterbodies today.
3. The current hierarchy of obligations within Te Mana o Te Wai is designed to recognise the aspirations of all New Zealanders for healthy, functioning freshwater systems that support safe contact with, and reliable and sustainable use of, freshwater resources. It is a prioritisation that is grounded in science, but brings a cross-cultural perspective to bear on this major environmental issue. Te Mana o Te Wai is therefore a concept that all New Zealanders can support and NZFSS strongly believes that the hierarchy of obligations as they are currently set out in the NPS-FM (2020) are valid.
4. Any fundamental redevelopment of the NPS-FM would be ill-advised. If based on science and consultation with the same key partners and stakeholders, redevelopment would likely deliver a similar policy but would have significantly delayed its implementation and anticipated improvements to freshwater environments. It would also mean that we are unable to realise the value and contribution that the current NPS-FM would provide to the wealth and well-being of New Zealanders.
5. Further delays in the development of new Regional Plans and Policy Statements should be avoided. Currently inequitable consent decisions are being made under different NPS-FM policies, in some cases penalising early adopters of environmentally-appropriate water use practices, rather than encouraging and supporting them.

In summary, we ask that before redeveloping any freshwater policy, the Government acknowledges and takes into account the considerable time and resources spent to date, and the currently degraded state of our freshwater resources. We ask also that Government recognises the importance of evidence-based policy, and offer our services to inform further discussion.

Ngā mihi,



Dr Jenny Webster-Brown

President – On behalf of the New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society

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¹ 76% of New Zealand's indigenous freshwater fish are at risk of or threatened with extinction.

² <https://environment.govt.nz/assets/publications/our-freshwater-2023.pdf>

Rivers: Macroinvertebrate community index (MCI) trends at 56% of river monitoring sites were worsening, and only 25% were improving, between 2001 and 2020.

Lakes: Only 36% of monitored lakes are categorised as either 'very good', 'good' or 'fair', whereas 64% are categorised as either 'poor' or 'very poor'. 96% of our lowland shallow lakes were in 'poor' or 'very poor' health. <https://www.lawa.org.nz/explore-data/lakes/#/tb-national>. 36% percent of lake monitoring sites improved and 45% worsened between 2011 and 2020.

³ Models of *Campylobacter* infection risk estimated 45% of our country's total river length was unsuitable for activities such as swimming between 2016 and 2020. *E. coli* trends at 41% of river monitoring sites were worsening between between 2001 and 2020.