

# Open letter to the Coalition government from scientific societies

13 March 2024

Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, The Prime Minister  
Hon Penny Simmonds, Minister for the Environment  
Hon Andrew Hoggard, Associate Minister for the Environment  
Hon Tama Potaka, Minister for Conservation  
Hon Simon Watts, Minister for Climate Change  
Hon Judith Collins, Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology  
Hon Nicola Willis, Associate Minister for Climate Change  
Hon Shane Jones, Minister for Oceans and Fisheries  
Jenny Marcroft, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Oceans and Fisheries  
Hon Chris Bishop, Minister RMA Reform  
Simon Court, Parliamentary Under Secretary RMA Reform

Cc:

Hon Pryianca Radhakrishnan, Labour Party spokesperson for Conservation  
Hon Rachel Brooking, Labour Party spokesperson for Environment  
Hon Dr Megan Woods, Labour Party spokesperson for Climate Change  
Hon James Shaw, Green Party spokesperson for Climate Change  
Chlöe Swarbrick, Green Party spokesperson for Climate Change  
Lan Pham, Green Party spokesperson for the Environment  
Darleen Tana, Green Party spokesperson for Oceans and Fisheries  
Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, co-leader Te Pāti Māori  
Rawiri Waititi, co-leader Te Pāti Māori

## Changes to environmental legislation will weaken environmental protections

Tēnā koutou Prime Minister and Ministers,

We, the undersigned, are leaders of the scientific societies that conduct research on New Zealand's unique biodiversity, and represent thousands of members with expertise in these fields. We are highly concerned that recent and proposed legislative changes threaten to undermine New Zealand's progress on key environmental issues, both nationally and internationally.

New Zealand's plants, animals, fungi and ecosystems are globally unique and underpin key economic sectors (e.g. healthy soils and ecosystems are critical for our primary production sector, and tourists come to see our wild places and native species), but are also threatened with extinction. For instance, [over 75%](#) of New Zealand's native reptile, bird, bat and freshwater fish species are either threatened with extinction or at risk of becoming threatened. Much of our indigenous biodiversity most at risk is found on private land and/or subject to the detrimental impacts of land use and development pressures. A comprehensive legislative and policy framework centred on the protection of environmental values and sustainable resource management is imperative to ensure development occurs in a way that does not further degrade our environment, unique biodiversity, and natural capital. Safeguarding and enhancing our natural environment is not merely a 'nice to have', but is critical for [sustaining wellbeing](#) and primary productivity. Furthermore, New Zealand has international obligations to conserve biodiversity under the Convention on Biological Diversity of which New Zealand is a signatory.

Your government has proposed a range of changes to environmental legislation that are not responsive to the dual biodiversity and climate crises, that undermine rather than sustain the natural capital upon which the economy is dependent, and which will take us backwards without sufficient protections in place. These changes include: the introduction of the Fast-track Approvals Bill to Parliament on 7 March 2024; repeal of both the Natural and Built Environment Act 2023 and Spatial Planning Act 2023; proposed changes to the National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity 2023 (including ceasing implementation of new Significant Natural Areas); and replacing the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020.

We are very concerned about the speed of implementation of this legislative agenda and the lack of adequate public consultation that has accompanied it. This demonstrates a lack of respect for democratic law-making processes and environmental protections. It is also inconsistent with your government's stated goal of evidence-based decision-making (s17F of your [coalition agreement](#)). Without such consultation and consideration, it is highly likely that the proposed legislative change will come at the cost of our natural environment, ecosystems, and native biodiversity on which our economy and survival depends.

For example, the Fast-track Approvals Bill introduces a worrying level of executive power, meaning development projects will be vulnerable to political decision-making and ministerial discretion, without appropriate checks and balances. The decision-making criteria are weighted towards development, not environmental protection or sustainable resource use. This is highly disturbing in the face of the worsening biodiversity and climate crises.


The fast-tracking process will green-light projects regardless of their immediate and ongoing adverse impacts, removing the ability to avoid these impacts in the first instance. Not all issues can be resolved or effectively and appropriately managed via consent conditions. Development and job creation cannot come at all costs. The suite of legislative changes values short-term economic gain over long-term consideration of the natural environment and the ecosystem services it delivers now and for future generations, such as provision of food, drinking water, and mitigation of storm events.

Consequently, we urge you to slow the pace of this legislative change, allow adequate time for appropriate parliamentary select committee processes, and consult widely and thoroughly with the public, stakeholders, and experts, such as the members of our scientific societies. A legislative agenda that diminishes the importance of the environment will not position New Zealand favourably with consumers and trading partners, and will imperil our international obligations to conserve indigenous biodiversity.

Your sincerely,



Dr Jo Monks  
Vice-President, New Zealand Ecological Society



Professor Jenny Webster-Brown  
President, New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society



Dr Stephanie Godfrey  
President, Society for Research on Amphibians  
and Reptiles in New Zealand



Associate Professor Heather Hendrickson  
President, Te Manatōpū Mātai Koiora Moroiti |  
The New Zealand Microbiological Society



Ingrid Hutzler  
Executive Officer, The Ornithological Society of  
New Zealand (Birds New Zealand)



Dr Cor Vink  
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Society



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Vice-President, Australasian Systematic  
Botanical Society



Dr Jordan Hampton  
President, Australasian Wildlife Management  
Society



Professor David Orlovich  
President, Fungal Network of New Zealand



Anthony Wright  
President, New Zealand Botanical Society