

MEDIA RELEASE

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Intensive farming decision results in One Plan change proposal

At their Strategy and Policy committee meeting today, Horizons Regional Councillors moved a recommendation for Council to investigate partial One Plan change options.

Horizons chair Bruce Gordon says the decision was made today because the committee was clearly informed that, following an Environment Court's ruling, if farmers had to meet the current nitrogen leaching numbers in the One Plan a significant number of businesses would no longer be viable.

"Council is responsible to its community and I want to reassure farmers that while our intention is to improve water quality, we are unified in not wanting to bankrupt multiple businesses. As a result, the Strategy and Policy committee have recommended Council instructs officers to prepare options for a change to the One Plan's policies and rules around intensive agriculture," says Mr Gordon.

"In the meantime, new application forms and guidance material for applicants seeking intensive land use consents under the One Plan have been produced as required by the Court's decision."

The Environment Court's decision followed declaratory proceedings by Environmental Defence Society (EDS) and Wellington Fish and Game. Council officers will be meeting with EDS and Fish and Game representatives later this month to clarify their expectations.

"While the new application forms have been reviewed externally and will be available by the end of August, the legal pathway for applicants to get consent is hugely complex and likely unachievable for many farmers. There is no certainty that in many situations restricted discretionary consents could be issued," says Mr Gordon.

"That being said, the best place for applicants to be is engaged with Council, as some farmers will be able to apply for consent and others will continue to make environmental improvement. Our staff will be available to work with the affected applicants. This includes direct communication and community meetings.

"It is important to note that good progress has been made around the Region in improving water quality, and Council is committed to continuing to build on these successes.

"While 95 per cent of the One Plan has been successfully implemented, rules and policies for intensive agriculture have been particularly challenging," says Mr Gordon.

"In 2005 we were an early adopter of an approach to managing leaching. Science, knowledge and regulation methods continue to change and unsurprisingly we are learning what works and what doesn't.

"A partial plan change won't take another decade, however our main concern is getting the pace of change right. Plan changes are a public process and will also need to identify the impact on individual landowners and the community as we all work to improve our rivers.

“Trends for the past decade show that both regulatory and non regulatory efforts across all catchments have contributed to our Region’s water quality trends improving. This includes 58 per cent of the 36 monitored sites improved for total oxidised nitrogen (TON) and none in decline.

“We have recently increased these monitored sites to over 70, which will allow for even more in-depth data to help inform future decision making and where best to target our collective efforts.

“Ultimately, our commitment is to the environmental, economic, and social wellbeing of the Region as we move forward.”

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