

Open Letter to Prime Minister Christopher Luxon: Don't take freshwater policy backwards

A call to the Prime Minister and Ministers from 50 freshwater experts and leaders to retain the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 and make no changes to Te Mana o te Wai.

Monday 18th December 2023

Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, Prime Minister,
Hon Chris Bishop, Minister for RMA reform,
Hon Penny Simmonds, Minister for the Environment, and
Hon Todd McClay, Minister of Agriculture.

Dear Prime Minister and Ministers,

New Zealand's rivers, lakes and aquifers are in a dire state. If you proceed with your proposals to undo the country's freshwater policy, they will only get worse.

The health of the country's waterways is already under immense pressure, and the pollution of rivers, lakes and aquifers is resulting in some communities' drinking water breaching human health standards.

Polluted water profoundly undermines the health of our communities and our international reputation. Conversely, healthy waterways and functioning ecosystems support every community and every individual, and buffer communities against the impacts of climate change.

Climate change will further amplify the problems our waterways face. For example, as warmer temperatures combine with polluted water, waterways will experience more algal blooms which can suffocate fish and other wildlife. As rainfall patterns continue to change drinking water is at risk from contamination as well as over-extraction. As storm events are more frequent and intense, unstable soil or land will wash away meaning valuable topsoil is lost and downstream communities suffer.

The country's freshwater policy, including Te Mana o te Wai, is the result of decades of public concern and policy development. To weaken this now, would be to take the country and our communities backwards.

Te Mana o te Wai is the decision-making framework central to the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020. It prioritises the health of people and the natural environment by requiring councils to first

protect the health of waterways and the quality of communities drinking water before commercial activities can be considered. It is a much needed and long-overdue change in direction. Te Mana o te Wai does not preclude commercial activity. Instead, it gives necessary weight in plans and in law to value of clean, safe water for the whole community and younger generations.

Additionally, regional councils and local communities already have significant flexibility in how they apply the policy to their catchments. The main and essential restriction is that no council or community can decide to make freshwater pollution worse. Waterbodies are not required to be pristine but, where they are below bottom lines, work is required over time to restore their health.

To “rebalance” Te Mana o te Wai to prioritise commercial use of water, as we have in the past, would result in more pollution of water. It would leave our country, our economy, and our people increasingly vulnerable as climate change impacts become more frequent and intense, and as the international community demands demonstrable environmental credentials and progress.

Those of us signing this letter know the long history of the country’s freshwater policy. Agreements like the 2003 Clean Streams Accord, a collaboration between industry and government, were tried and failed to deliver the protection needed.

The public has been calling on central government to provide stronger protection for water and to drive the restoration of rivers, lakes, and other waterbodies for decades. History tells us concern and pressure from the public will only increase.

To remove, replace or rewrite our country’s national freshwater policy at this time, so soon after it has been brought in, would be a terrible mistake.

We call on you to listen to the wider community – not just the minority of voices who have asked you to undo the progress the country has made towards cleaner drinking water and healthier waterways.

Please, take the country forward and provide the leadership needed to achieve healthy water for us all.

Signed,

Signatories are experts in freshwater research, restoration of waterways and/or are leaders on freshwater issues nationally and regionally. Signatories are from around the country and across disciplines, including public health, ecology, Mātauranga, public policy, business, and agriculture.

1. **Dr Mike Joy**, Freshwater Ecologist, Victoria University of Wellington
2. **Tina Porou MNZM** (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Kahungunu ki te Wairoa, Ngāi Tāmanuhiri), Te Mana o te Wai advocate.
3. **Traci Houpapa MNZM JP** (Waikato Maniapoto, Taranaki, Tūwharetoa), Agribusiness, economic development and freshwater leader, Waikato.
4. **Professor Michael Baker MNZM**, Epidemiologist (expert in infectious diseases), University of Otago, Wellington.
5. **Gabrielle Huria MNZM** (Ngāi Tahu), Te Titirei / Chief Executive Te Kura Taka Pini Limited, Canterbury.
6. **Professor Te Maire Tau** (Ngāi Tahu), Ūpoko of the Ngāi Tūāhuriri hapū, Canterbury.

7. **Paul Morgan CNZM, QSO** (Ngāti Rārua, Te Mahurehure, Ngā Puhi), Agribusiness, economic development and freshwater leader, Nelson.
8. **Honorary Professorial Fellow Paul Tapsell** (Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Raukawa), The Australian National University, Canberra.
9. **Professor Russell Death**, Freshwater Ecologist, Massey University, Palmerston North.
10. **Liz Mellish MNZM** (Te Ātiawa, Taranaki, Ngāti Ruanui), Māori business and Freshwater Leader, Wairarapa.
11. **Hilton Collier** (Ngati Porou) Agribusiness and freshwater leader, CEO Taiao Connect Ltd. Hawke's Bay.
12. **Professor Gerry Closs**, Freshwater Ecologist, University of Otago, Dunedin.
13. **Dr Mahina-a-rangi Baker** (Te Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai, Ngāti Raukawa and Ngāti Toarangatira), Māori environmental planner and Co-Chair of her local Kāpiti Freshwater Planning Committee, Kāpiti.
14. **Kingi Smiler** (Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, Te Ati Awa, Te Aitanga-a-Mahaki, Rongowhakaata), Agribusiness and freshwater leader, Waikato.
15. **Associate Professor Daniel Hikuroa** (Ngāti Maniapoto, Waikato-Tainui, Ngaati Whanaunga), Earth systems scientist, University of Auckland.
16. **Dr Jenny Webster-Brown**, Water quality Research Scientist and Director, Canterbury.
17. **Professor Simon Hales**, Environmental Epidemiologist, University of Otago, Wellington.
18. **Dr Tara McAllister** (Te Aitanga a Māhaki), Freshwater Ecologist, Research Victoria University of Wellington.
19. **Dr Tanira Kingi** (Ngati Whakaue, Ngati Rangitahi), Emeritus Scientist, Scion, Bay of Plenty.
20. **Professor David Hamilton**, Director of the Australian Rivers Institute, Griffith University, Queensland.
21. **Vanessa Tipoki** (Ngāti Kahungunu ki te Wairoa), sheep and beef farmer and environmental planner, South Wairarapa.
22. **Te Kapunga Dewes** (Ngati Porou, Te Arawa, Te Whakatohea) CEO Whenua Oho, CEO Interpine Innovation, Chair Nga Pou a Tane.
23. **Kim Jones**, Poutokomanawa/Co-Director - National Freshwater Programmes Lead, Mountains to Sea Conservation Trust, Te Tai Tokerau Northland.
24. **Kathryn Gale** (Ngāti Pāhauwera, Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Kahungunu), Freshwater Scientist, Wairoa, Hawkes Bay.
25. **Millan Ruka MNZM** (Te Urioroi, Te Parawhau, Te Mahurehure), Freshwater leader, Environment River Patrol Aotearoa, Northland.
26. **Dr Jane Kitson** (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Mamoe, Waitaha), Freshwater Ecologist, Director, Kitson Consulting, Murihiku/Southland
27. **Dr Ian Kusabs** (Te Arawa, Ngāti Tuwharetoa, Ngāti Maru), Freshwater Scientist, Ian Kusabs and Associates Ltd., Rotorua
28. **Honorary Professor Troy Baisden**, Environmental Scientist, University of Auckland.

29. **Dr Aroha Spinks** (Ngāti Raukawa), Freshwater science, planning and restoration, Wellington region.
30. **Dr Catherine Knight**, Honorary Research Associate, Massey University.
31. **Professor Ian C. Fuller**, Fluvial geomorphologist, Massey University, Palmerston North.
32. **Manu Caddie** (Ngāti Pūkenga, Ngāti Hauā), Restoration leader and environmental advocacy, Tairāwhiti.
33. **Tina Ngata** (Ngāti Porou), Environmental, Indigenous and Human Rights Researcher and environmental restoration, Tairāwhiti.
34. **Dr Alison Dewes**, Ecologist and veterinarian, Bay of Plenty.
35. **Luke Pani** Arapata Tipoki (Ngāti Kahungunu ki te Wairoa), Father, Business Owner, Kaitiaki, Te Karu o te Ika, Wairarapa.
36. **Ngāio Tiuka**, (Tuhoe, Ruapani, Kahungunu), Ngāti Kahungunu Environment and Natural Resources Director, Hawke's Bay.
37. **Morry Black** (Ngāti Kahungunu, Nga Rauru Kitahi, Ngāti Porou), Resource Management consultant, Mauri Protection Agency, Hawke's Bay.
38. **Eugene Doyle**, Convenor Te Hononga Ki Te Upoko, Wellington Catchments Collective.
39. **Annette Sykes** (Te Arawa, Ngāti Makino, Ngāti Pikiao), Lawyer and Freshwater Leader, Rotorua.
40. **Dr Jamie Ataria** (Rongomaiwahine, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Tūwharetoa), Māori Business Development Consultant and Ecotoxicologist, Nelson.
41. **Associate Professor Alexandra Macmillian**, Environmental health and Public Health Physician, University of Otago, Dunedin.
42. **Dr Francis J. Burdon**, Ecologist, The University of Waikato, Hamilton.
43. **Associate Professor Nicholas Ling**, Ecologist, The University of Waikato, Hamilton.
44. **Dr Issie Barrett**, Lecturer in River Restoration, Waterways Centre, Lincoln University and University of Canterbury.
45. **Professor Alastair Woodward**, Epidemiologist and biostatistician, Expertise in environmental health and climate change. University of Auckland.
46. **Associate Professor Rhys Jones** (Ngāti Kahungunu), Public Health Physician, University of Auckland.
47. **Kevin Moran**, Coordinator, Save Our Springs Inc., Golden Bay.
48. **Sophie Tweddle**, Freshwater Ecologist and Director of Restoring Nature Ltd., Auckland.
49. **Dr Tim Chambers**, Public Health Researcher, Drinking Water, University of Otago Wellington
50. **Phil Murray**, Chair, Central Otago Environment Society, Otago.
51. **Marnie Prickett**, Research Fellow, drinking water source protection, University of Otago, Wellington