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Report to the Policy and Finance Committee
from John Holmes, Section Leader, Policy Advice

The New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy and the Wellington Regional Council's role in its implementation

1. Purpose

To inform the Committee of the contents of the Strategy; and

To outline the relationship between the contents of the Strategy and the Council's ecosystem management work.

2. Background

The final version of the *New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy* was released in March 2000. It does not call for submissions. However, Councillors have expressed considerable interest in the Strategy and have asked for a report on its content and implications for the Council. We are presenting this report to the Policy and Finance Committee because a number of Councillors who are not on the Environment Committee have expressed an interest in the Strategy.

At the same time that the Biodiversity Strategy was considered, the Ministerial Advisory Committee on the protection of biodiversity on private land released its discussion document called *Bio-what?*. The purpose of this document is to find ways of implementing the Biodiversity Strategy on all land other than that owned by the Crown. Its main thrust is how to convince private land owners to protect special native ecosystems on their properties, and it has an extensive discussion of ways in which the Resource Management Act 1991 and other mechanisms can be used to achieve this. This document does seek submissions. A submission has been prepared and is presented to the Committee in this Order Paper (see Report 00.361.)

The Draft *New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy* was released in January 1999. Following extensive consideration of the implications of the Strategy by officers and councillors (see

Report 99.142), the Council made a submission on the document in April 1999. The submission supported the Strategy direction but sought some wording changes to the main goal to reflect the Council's view that just halting the decline in biodiversity was not a sufficiently positive target. The submission also said that recognition needed to be given to the importance of ecological "processes" as much as valued "places", and that if we are indeed to "turn the tide", then more urgent action was needed. There were also comments about the resources and mandate needed for the Council to help implement the Strategy.

After a year of deliberation, and a change of Government, a slightly revised final Strategy has now been launched.

3. Summary of the Strategy

The final version of the Strategy is not a lot different from the draft. The amendments made are more in structure than in substance, other than a change to more explicitly recognise the Treaty of Waitangi and the role of Maori in conservation. There is also greater acknowledgement of the economic, biological and cultural value of genetic resources from introduced species.

The Strategy largely retains the Goal of the Draft version. Unfortunately, it does not reflect this Council's wish for a more challenging goal than just flattening out the line of decline. It contains nearly 150 recommended actions, among which are 43 priority actions. The priority actions are also generally the same as in the Draft and have been chosen as "those likely to best position us in the short term (5 years) to achieve the Strategy's goals in the longer term".

The Strategy anticipates that these priority actions will find expression in agencies' annual plans and budgets and their long term plans and programmes (such as the Regional Policy Statement, regional plans and long term financial strategies).

Under each of the 150 recommended actions, the lead agency is identified, along with "key players". For some actions, regional councils (or local authorities, including regional councils) are a lead agency (9 instances) and for many others they are key players (74 cases). Clearly, there are high expectations of local authorities generally to play a major role in delivering the Strategy's desired outcomes.

4. How does the Council measure up?

This Council has had a policy commitment to biodiversity and ecosystem management for some time. From the earliest drafts of the Regional Policy Statement (RPS) in the early 1990s, ecological thinking has been included. The Council adopted a suite of objectives, policies, and methods relating to the Region's ecosystems in the Ecosystems chapter of the RPS in 1995; biodiversity was a key concern.

The Council has undertaken a range of activities for many years which benefit biodiversity (e.g. KNE pest management, soil conservation, regional parks, regional plans) and, as part of its Long Term Financial Strategy, is proposing a suite of new investments to make better provision for our more scarce or threatened natural ecosystems (e.g., wetlands, lowland forest remnants, dunes, riparian zones, and coastal areas).

As an indication of how far the Council's work already reflects the *New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy*, Table 1 in the Attachment to this report is instructive. It sets out most of the priority actions from the Biodiversity Strategy in which regional councils are expected to play a significant role. It compares this with programmes and initiatives that the Council is taking (or will take as a result of the Long Term Financial Strategy) and which will give effect to those priorities.

The Table clearly demonstrates that the Council is already moving in the directions sought by the Strategy.

5. An Ecosystems Strategy for the Region

There is a coherent rationale behind the ecosystems and biodiversity work the Council is doing, and we are changing the way we are working to incorporate ecological principles and processes into our management of the environment. This has been driven by the RPS's policies and methods on ecosystems and the need to find a way to implement them.

Incorporating ecological principles, or adopting an ecosystem-based approach to managing resources, means managing land, water, air, and plants and animals for the contribution each makes, or the function each performs, in the living systems they make up. By sustaining these wider life-giving processes and natural cycles in as many places and ways as we are able, the environment will be truly managed sustainably, and indigenous biodiversity will be supported and encouraged to reappear.

As we have been implementing the RPS's ecosystem policies, however, it has become more and more apparent that a mechanism is needed to explain exactly what the Council is doing (and proposing to do) in this regard. Something akin to a regional ecosystems strategy (or implementation document) is needed to translate the RPS's generic ecosystem policies and broadly expressed methods into a set of projects and activities benefiting specific areas or habitats. This document would, of course, explain the Council's biodiversity aspirations as well, providing a "road map" and explanation for how the Council will implement its obligations under the national Biodiversity Strategy.

We have been working on the component parts of such a document for the last year and a half, commencing with encouraging staff to adopt an ecological approach in their work, developing ideas and preferences with Councillors through workshops (last year's LTFS, State of the Environment, and Ecosystems Workshops), and determining new programmes and setting budgets (for example, for wetlands and bush remnants) through the Long Term Financial Strategy. The Council has also worked out its goal for biodiversity in this Region through its submission on the Draft NZBS. We plan to combine these goals, preferences and programmes to constitute the Council's ecosystems implementation strategy.

However, we considered it prudent to wait until the New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy had indicated a national direction before completing this document. This has now happened. Of course *Bio-What* is also relevant (see the accompanying report in this Committee's papers), and we will take it into account, although we do not believe we should wait until the end of *Bio-What's* progress before bringing the ecosystem implementation strategy back to the Council.

6. Conclusion

The New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy is an important document with a critical message. While it may not go far enough in its recommendations and lack the vision this Council might prefer, it nonetheless has elevated biodiversity decline to national prominence and it demands a strategic response. In the Wellington Region, much is being done already by the Council, other agencies, and members of the community. However, as the Council's State of the Environment Report, *Measuring Up*, demonstrated, the task is a large one and will require effort and determination from agencies and individuals.

7. **Communications**

As this paper is essentially a summary for Councillors of the Biodiversity Strategy, no immediate public communication of its contents is considered necessary.

8. **Recommendation**

That the report be received and the contents noted.

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Attachments: 1