

# Submission on Plan Change 1 to the Natural Resources Plan Greater Wellington Region

## Hearing Stream One - Overarching matters and region-wide changes

### Te Awarua-o-Porirua Harbour and Catchments Community Trust and Guardians of Pāuatahanui Inlet

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The Te Awarua-o-Porirua Harbour and Catchments Community Trust (Porirua Harbour Trust) and Guardians of Pāuatahanui Inlet (GOPI) makes this submission on Plan Change 1 of Greater Wellington Regional Council's Natural Resources Plan (the 'NRP' or 'Regional Plan') for the Greater Wellington region.

## 1. BACKGROUND

### A. Te Awarua-o-Porirua Harbour and Catchments Community Trust (Porirua Harbour Trust)

The Te Awarua-o-Porirua Harbour and Catchments Community Trust is an independent entity with a role of overseeing and advocating for the sustainable management and environmental health of the Porirua Harbour and catchments.

The Objectives of the Porirua Harbour Trust (PHT) are to promote the sustainable management of the Porirua Harbour and its catchment by:

- a. Advocating for the sustainable management of the harbour's ecosystem and its catchments; Fostering the understanding of ecological and environmental issues associated with the harbour and its catchments through education and community awareness;
- b. Co-ordinating input from community groups on issues relating to the harbour and its catchments;
- c. Supporting, promoting and contributing to programmes and projects aimed at improvements to the Porirua Harbour ecosystem and its catchments;
- d. Fostering an understanding that the rural and urban areas around the harbour have specific needs; and
- e. Engaging in any other activities and processes that are complementary to any of the foregoing objectives including to promote or undertake research.



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## **B. Guardians of Pāuatahanui Inlet**

Guardians of Pāuatahanui Inlet (GOPI) is a registered charity that advocates for the recognition and protection of the ecological, recreational and cultural values of the Pāuatahanui Inlet.

## **C. Porirua Harbour and Catchments – The Area of Interest**

The Porirua Harbour, comprising the Onepoto Arm and the Pauatahanui Inlet and the outer harbour, and its contributing catchments (~19,000 ha.) provides a range of significant values to the wider Wellington region. The harbour contains the largest estuary system (11% intertidal with narrow opening) in the lower North Island, and has high importance for wildlife habitat, cultural, recreational, and economic values. The whole harbour forms one inter-related, interdependent ecosystem.

Pāuatahanui Inlet, which is a key component of the Porirua Harbour ecosystem is the only remaining large estuarine wetland in the lower half of the North Island of New Zealand. Despite being classified as a 'Site of Special Wildlife Interest' and an area of 'Significant Conservation Value', there are several significant pressures that affect the Inlet, mainly from human activities in both the Inlet itself and throughout the whole catchment.

## **D. Expected Outcomes of the GWRC Natural Resource Plan to Enhance Degraded Environments**

The PHT and GOPI recognises the vital importance of healthy water for maintaining the health of our waterbodies, freshwater ecosystems and the communities that rely upon them for their sustenance and wellbeing. By protecting the health and wellbeing of our streams and estuaries, we in turn protect the health and wellbeing of our people and surrounding environments.

The current principles underpinning current legislation provide consideration of outcomes that if a waterbody is degraded, then it should be enhanced – and status quo and acceptance of a degraded state is not acceptable.

It is from this advocacy perspective that recognises that Porirua Harbour is in a degraded state that the Porirua Harbour Trust provides its commentary on two aspects of the Plan Changes to the GWRC Natural Resources Plan (NRP).

### **1. Fish Passage – Need to address existing fish passage barriers as discretionary activities.**

Rule 5.4.8 should be a discretionary activity to provide fish passage over artificial barriers such as dams even for those that have existed for 10 years or more – rather than reverting to permitted activity status. If these are consented using permitted



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activity status then this will authorise a past decision which leaves a negative legacy and does not address the issues around fish passage that remain.

While there are examples provided in the Section 32 Report where the structures have driven irreversible land use change – there may be occasions where structures remain a significant impediment for fish passage, and remediation is possible. There are examples where structures have been constructed decades ago, but their continued consenting status should not simply be decided on the basis of longevity since construction. A periodic review (e.g. every 20 or 30 years) of their appropriateness of continuance based on current adverse effects on river systems and ecosystem health to confirm that the structures are still 'fit-for-purpose' should still occur through scrutiny via a discretionary consent pathway.

With the current proposed rule change there is no comprehensive list of all the sites where this would/could apply. There is also no process defined for public scrutiny and to assess whether the 'community' accepts the quantum of degradation – and under a permitted activity status there will be no leverage to critically assess this.

We consider that granting long-term consents for up to 35 years with a discretionary consenting process is still appropriate.

## 2. Clarify and strengthen rules and methods to support actions to increase wetland habitat

PHT support Rules and Methods that provide for, or encourage, increasing the extent of wetland habitat in the rural landscape and in the river/stream corridors.

The rules in the Natural Resources Plan should be enabling and consideration given as to how to relax rules around developing "constructed wetlands" and developing wetlands on suitable sites – such as gullies and areas currently considered 'wet paddocks'.

Making regulations easier for wetland restoration and creation can help promote conservation efforts while ensuring that environmental standards are met. Some strategies to consider:

1. **Streamlined Permitting Processes:** Simplifying and expediting the permitting process for wetland projects can encourage more landowners and organisations to engage in restoration efforts. This could involve a fast-track approval process for smaller projects that meet specific criteria.
2. **Clear Guidelines and Standards:** Providing clear and accessible guidelines for wetland design and restoration can help project managers understand requirements and best practices.
3. **Easier Compliance Pathways:** Creating alternative compliance options, that allows them to meet regulatory requirements while supporting wetland conservation efforts.
4. **Integration with Land Use Planning:** Incorporating wetland conservation into broader land use and farm planning and urban planning frameworks can create a more cohesive approach.

Other Regional Councils in New Zealand are considering ways to create a more conducive environment for wetland restoration and creation, ultimately leading to improved ecological health and community engagement in conservation efforts. In



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addition, changes to the NES on wetland restoration currently under consideration may also direction in achieving these outcomes.

Increasing the extent of wetlands in rural landscapes, urban plan design (such as Plimmerton Farm urban planning proposals) or river corridors offers numerous ecological, hydrological, and social benefits. Each of the following factors contributes to healthier ecosystems and more resilient communities:

1. **Biodiversity Support and Enhancement:** Wetlands serve as critical habitats for a wide variety of species, including birds, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates.
2. **Water Quality Improvement:** Wetlands act as natural filters, trapping pollutants and sediments from agricultural runoff and urban areas. They can significantly improve water quality by removing excess nutrients (like nitrogen and phosphorus) and pathogens and can lead to substantial reductions in nutrient loads entering waterways (and ultimately the receiving waters such as Porirua Harbour).
3. **Flood Mitigation:** Wetlands can absorb and store excess rainwater, reducing the risk of flooding downstream, and decreasing peak flow during storm events.
4. **Carbon Sequestration:** Wetlands are effective carbon sinks, capturing and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.
5. **Soil Stabilisation:** Wetlands help prevent soil erosion by stabilizing shorelines and riverbanks with their root systems. This is particularly important in areas prone to erosion due to agricultural practices or urban development.

## CONCLUSION:

### Porirua Harbour Trust – Outcome Expectations:

1. The degraded ecosystems of the Te Awarua Porirua Harbour and the catchments that flow into the harbour are improved.

Porirua Harbour Trust supports the Plan Changes that align with our Trust's vision:

- *to maintain and enhance the health of Te Awarua o Porirua*
- *enhance the quality of the environment by protecting the integrity of existing ecosystems and by restoring degraded ecosystems wherever possible*
- *enable people to enjoy recreational activities*
- *enable people to undertake economic activities without compromising the reasonably foreseeable needs of present and future generations*
- *to be able to eat kai moana from the harbour*



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