



Speaking notes – Gore District Plan ECO – 25th February 2025, 9:05am

The Royal Forest and Bird Society of New Zealand Incorporated – Chelsea McGaw

Kia ora koutou

Ko Hokonui te maunga
Ko mata ura te awa
Nō Maruawai ahau
Kei Ōtepoti au e noho ana
Ko au te Regional Conservation Manager ki Te Reo o te Taiao
Ko McGaw tōku whānau
Ko Chelsea tōku ingoa

My name is Chelsea McGaw. I am the Otago and Southland Regional Conservation Manager for the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand Incorporated, or more commonly known as Forest & Bird.

Today I am speaking on behalf of Forest & Bird and our Southland branch in relation to our submission on the Proposed Gore District Plan.

Gore is where I was brought up, where much of my whanau were brought up, where my friends still live and where I visit often. It is a place I still hold close connection to and where I whakapapa to.

The current Gore District Plan became operative in July 2006, meaning the plan is close to 20 years old. Consequently, much of the content of the current plan is outdated and does not reflect more modern legislation such as the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management (NPS-FM) and the National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity (NPS-IB).

RMA section 75(3) requires that a district plan must give effect to any national policy statement, any New Zealand coastal policy statement and any regional policy statement.

New Zealand is in a combined climate and biodiversity crisis, with a high proportion of its native species threatened or at risk of extinction, making it one of the countries with the highest extinction rates globally. Between 2012 and 2017, population declines were recorded for sixty-one vascular plant species. Some threatened plants are key structural species for ecosystems, so their declines can have significant ramifications for their associated ecosystems. The major decline in many indigenous land-based species, and in some case their extinction, is largely the result of the substantial reduction in the extent and quality of natural habitats, the impact of introduced predators and herbivores and the legacy of past impacts. Indigenous vegetation continues to disappear with land use change and intensification.

While rates of loss have slowed in recent times, less than half of Aotearoa New Zealand's land area now Biodiversity in Aotearoa remains in indigenous vegetation cover.

It is important to note that Gore District has suffered high amounts of past ecological loss. There is a high proportion of Acutely Threatened, Chronically Threatened and At-Risk LENZ Environments where less than 30% of native vegetation cover remains.

There are a limited number of Department of Conservation (DoC) areas of Public Conservation Land management for biodiversity values or QEII covenants in the Gore District.

The Gore District supports a range of nationally and regionally threatened species and ecosystems including rare plant species including the nationally critical Rohutu, nationally threatened Hector's tree daisy and the nationally endangered *Carex strictissima*.

Te Mana o te Taiao, Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy was released in 2020 and is a roadmap driving conservation action happening at a national, regional and local level to address pressures on nature. It highlights five outcomes for biodiversity in New Zealand by 2050. The two important ones to mention here are Outcome one: Ecosystems, from mountain tops to ocean depths, are thriving and Outcome two: Indigenous species and their habitats across Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond are thriving. The Gore District Council can do its part in achieving these outcomes by providing robust rules, objectives and policies within its District Plan to protect biodiversity throughout the district.

Since the release of the proposed District Plan, the NPS-IB has come into force, with Councils beginning to implement its requirements, particularly identification of Significant Natural Areas (or SNAs) over the past couple of years. These are New Zealand's most important remnants of native habitats, with RMA section 6 requiring them to be protected. Much of our submission was focused on Significant Natural Areas. Although the government has suspended the need to comply with the NPS-IB's requirement to identify these areas, they have not abolished this requirement which is still part of the National Policy Statement. It is also important to mention that the suspension does not change the need for councils to protect areas of national importance under s6 of the RMA as mentioned before. Many Councils across the country, including Southern councils, have already identified these areas in their District Plans, and have a process as part of their resource consent processing to map when they are found through Assessments of Environmental Effects or as part of their own Council property and reserves.

Closely linked to biodiversity is water quality, with Southland experiencing the greatest losses in water quality, with a net loss of 2,665 hectares of freshwater wetlands between 1996 and 2018. Of the area of freshwater wetlands that have been lost, 98 percent were because of conversion to land covers associated with farming and forestry. The Council can halt any further loss of these important biodiversity areas by controlling activities through the District Plan and ensuring adequate setbacks, strong vegetation clearance and earthworks rules, preventing grazing and so on.

Although some responsibility for biodiversity and linked issues such as freshwater falls to the regional authority, territorial authorities still have responsibility to implement the Regional Policy Statement, Regional Plan and for integrated management under RMA section 31, specifically (1)(b)(iii) 'the maintenance of indigenous biological diversity' and (1)(e) 'the control



of any actual or potential effects of activities in relation to the surface of water in rivers and lakes', but also (f) 'any other functions specified in this Act'.

Being in a combined biodiversity and climate crises, it is important to recognise that wins for biodiversity also equal wins for climate. These issues cannot be looked at in isolation, and nature-based solutions such as healthy ecosystems can help us mitigate climate change. Biodiversity can do this by enhancing the resilience of ecosystems, allowing them to better adapt to changing environmental conditions like extreme weather events, by providing a wider range of species with different tolerances to temperature fluctuations, and by supporting vital ecosystem services like carbon sequestration through healthy vegetation and wetlands, thus regulating the climate naturally.

Thank you for your time this morning and for considering Forest & Birds submission.

Kia ora and are there any questions?