



Submission of Civic Trust Auckland

Environment (Disestablishment of Ministry for the Environment) Amendment Bill

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1. Civic Trust Auckland

(a) Civic Trust Auckland (CTA) is a non-profit public interest group, formed in 1968, with activities and interests throughout the greater Auckland region.

(b) The aims of the Trust include:

- Protection of natural landforms
- Preservation of heritage, in all its aspects
- Encouragement of good planning for the city and region.

(c) CTA has a longstanding and contiguous interest in matters of the environment and heritage and regularly submits on various government bills. We have submitted on the following: Resource Management Reform Bill (28.2.13), Improving our resource management system: A discussion document (2.4.13), National Policy Statement on Urban Development Capacity (15.7.16), COVID-19 Recovery (Fast-track Consenting) Bill (21.6.20), Government Policy Statement on Housing and Urban Development (30.7.21), Consultation Draft of the Natural and Built Environment Bill (4.8.21), The Resource Management (Enabling Housing Supply and Other Matters) Amendment Bill (16.11.21), Natural and Built Environment Bill (5.2.23), Fast-track Approvals Bill (19.4.24), Resource Management (Consenting and Other System Changes) Amendment Bill (10.2.25), Fast-track Approvals Amendment Bill (17.11.25), and Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill (13.2.26).

2. The Role of the Ministry for the Environment (MfE)

(a) Established in 1986 by the Environment Act, the purpose of this ministry was to provide expert advice to the government on environmental protection. The purpose of the Environment Act was to “ensure that, in the management of natural and physical resources, full and balanced account is taken of: (i) the intrinsic values of ecosystems, (ii) all values which are placed by individuals and groups on the quality of the environment, (iii) the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, (iv) the sustainability of natural and physical resources, and (v) the needs of future generations.”

(b) The vast majority of other countries have an agency that focuses exclusively on environmental policies and legislation; some have, in addition, a ministry or department with a focus on a particular aspect of the environment, such as climate change.

(c) In 2026 and into the future, when climate related destruction is increasing throughout New Zealand (and the world), our biodiversity is at risk and our environment continues to be degraded, it would seem that a dedicated and independent ministry is very much needed.

(d) With recent changes and further proposed changes to central government resource management legislation, as well as proposed local government changes, the MfE's staff, its funding, and its systems are vital so that the new acts, such as those replacing the Resource Management Act, will be effectively implemented, as well as work on policy direction, national standards, and environmental limits.

(e) MfE also has an important role in conducting the Crown's relationship with iwi regarding natural resources, and with the autonomous Crown Entity, Heritage New Zealand, with expertise and relationships built up over many years.

3. Role of Secretary for the Environment within MCERT

(a) CTA has a concern that the transfer of the environment-related functions of MfE to MCERT and the merger of four government agencies will reduce the ability of the new Secretary for the Environment to concentrate focus on the environment, as distinct from matters (such as housing and transport) that exist and evolve within that environment.

(b) It would also seem that the Secretary would have conflicting functions and directions: to both protect the environment and enable development. We are concerned that decision making by the Secretary in the new role as Ministry Chief Executive will involve ill-considered trade-offs between environmental and development objectives, with environmental protection seen as an impediment to development, rather than a statutory goal to be upheld.

(c) Clause 12 of the Bill amends Section 30 of the Environment Act, which outlines matters to which every officer or employee of MfE must have regard. The amendment requires only the Secretary to have regard to those matters, removing the legal obligation of other MCERT staff to have regard to environmental matters. CTA sees this as introducing the increased possibility of negligence in dealing with environmental matters.

(d) Clause 17 amends a number of statutes of Schedule 3 of the Environment Act, replacing references to MfE with either reference to the Secretary for the Environment or the responsible department. The statutory functions under the Environment Act are vested in the Secretary, not in MCERT or its departmental head. This may weaken the environmental aspects for decisions made under other legislation, firstly because the Secretary for the Environment's focus (as Chief Executive of MCERT) expressly on the environment, may be negatively diluted by having to have regard to matters of urban development, transport, housing, and local government. Secondly, this may weaken environmental aspects if functional responsibility is pushed down to departmental levels where regard need not be given to environmental considerations.

(e) In CTA's view, the Secretary for the Environment should be resourced to appoint the staff needed to carry out the required functions and provide the expertise required. Further, the allocation of funding for and by the Secretary for the Environment would need to be clear, with priorities clearly articulated.

4. Reasons for disestablishing MfE

- (a)** The government has said it wants to disestablish MfE to reduce fragmentation and better integrate environmental considerations with infrastructure and urban development.
- (b)** Although recognising that integrated decision-making is important to reduce duplication and complexity, CTA does not think that MfE needs to be combined with three other ministries for this to occur.
- (c)** We are of the view that unlocking the economic potential of New Zealand cities and regions does not require the disestablishment of MfE.
- (d)** CTA questions the description of this Bill as “a minor and technical bill to transfer functions from the Ministry for the Environment to the Secretary for the Environment,” as it would seem that the proposed merger of MfE into MCERT is more than simply moving its functions into a ministerial conglomerate, and may lead to climate and nature protection being deprioritised in favour of unimpeded economic growth.

5. The environment and the economy

- (a)** CTA shares the view with other environmental, conservation and broader interest groups that the natural environment is an essential part of our economy, in particular, our trade and tourism industries, the latter depending on our unique landscapes, coastlines, waterways, forests and native wildlife.
- (b)** Healthy ecosystems maintain clean water, reduce flood risk, and protect food production. A resilient economy depends on healthy land, water, oceans, and climate.
- (c)** In New Zealand, land-based ecosystems provide benefits worth around 27% of our GDP, and indirectly, all economic activity relies on healthy natural systems
- (d)** When nature is degraded, our economy is put at risk. Protecting and restoring nature is the foundation of New Zealand’s economy.
- (e)** Investing properly in conservation and restoration creates skilled jobs in every region of the country, which we assume is the goal of any responsible government.

6. Further concerns with the Bill

- (a)** In CTA’s view, MfE should be properly resourced and strengthened, rather than having to undergo the onerous process of restructuring, which may result in the loss of some expert and longstanding staff.
- (b)** CTA is not convinced that merging MfE into the Ministry of Cities, Regions and Transport will bring about the better environmental protection that is clearly needed at this time, both in New Zealand and globally.
- (c)** The current government, under its Fast-track Approvals Act, has allowed ministers to ignore environmental expertise and local community input. Some of the projects given approval under fast-tracking will lead to irreversible negative environmental impacts. Mining, fossil fuel extraction and loss of the country’s built heritage are some of these.

(d) MCERT is set up to be a ministry focused on unimpeded economic growth, development, and infrastructure. CTA opposes prioritising short-term development over long-term environmental health.

(e) New Zealand's population will only grow, and along with it pressure on our environment, and consequently CTA considers that more legislation protecting the environment is warranted, not less.

(f) Our native species need more protection, not less. 4,000 of them are currently at risk, NZ having the highest species extinction rate in the world. This includes: 94% of reptiles, 93% of indigenous frog species, 91% of seabirds, 78% of terrestrial native birds, 76% of freshwater fish, and 68% of indigenous freshwater-dependent birds.

(g) Climate change effects, biodiversity loss, and pollution of air, land and water have become worse. 2024 was the hottest year on record, the first year when global temperatures reached more than 1.5°C above the pre-industrial level. In some areas of NZ sea level is expected to rise 20 to 30 centimetres by 2050 compared with 2005 levels. Climate change threats need to be addressed, not ignored.

(h) Safeguards for rivers, forests, and conservation land need to be strengthened, not weakened.

(i) Wetlands need more protection not less, as they currently constitute a mere 0.9% of New Zealand's land area.

(j) More funding for the environment is needed, not less: for the Department of Conservation, for climate adaptation and mitigation, for Green Investment Finance, for the Climate Resilience for Māori initiative, for Jobs for Nature, for decarbonisation initiatives and for science

(k) National directions on freshwater, biodiversity, and the coast need to be stronger, not weaker.

(l) CTA considers New Zealand's built heritage is at significant risk. The earthquakes in Christchurch resulted in significant loss, and in other cities around the country, earthquake regulations and development pressures have extensively depleted our built heritage. Recent RMA reforms have made it easier to delist heritage buildings and ignore the amenity provided by the character of our urban spaces, not only in cities but also in smaller urban centres. There is a National Policy Statement on Urban Development but none on our historic heritage. There was extensive consultation on strengthening New Zealand's protection system for heritage buildings (undertaken by the Ministry for Culture & Heritage, 2018), but that has gone nowhere.

(m) CTA strongly submits that the environment must be at the centre of political decision-making, not sidelined. We consider that the activities of other ministries are subsets within the environment.

(n) CTA shares the concern with other public interest groups that there will be fewer opportunities for scrutiny of decisions by such groups if there is no dedicated Ministry for the Environment.

7. Submission period

(a) In CTA's view, two weeks is not adequate time for submissions on this Bill. In addition, the Environment Committee is currently occupied with other pieces of

legislation, including the Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill, on which CTA submitted but was excluded from the hearings process, along with, we understand, many other groups that had made submissions, as the committee did not have enough time to hear them.

8. Recommendations

(a) CTA recommends to the Environment Committee that the Ministry for the Environment not be included in the proposed amalgamation of ministries that is the proposed MCERT.

(b) CTA submits that New Zealand needs a separate Ministry for the Environment because the environment is critical to the wellbeing of so many aspects of our country.

(c) There is so much work to be done as regards the environment that, rather than subsume the Ministry for the Environment into MCERT, we recommend that several new ministries be established, including the establishment of a Ministry of Green Works to support green infrastructure investment and regional economic development.

(d) Instead of disestablishing the Ministry for the Environment, if the Government has capacity for more legislative change, CTA suggests it reform the Fisheries Act, the Wildlife Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Climate Change Response Act, and implementing the National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity, including through further reform of the Resource Management Act.

(e) We submit that the government retains a unified system that integrates land use and environmental management, maintains strong, science-based environmental limits, and encourages public and interest group participation.

(f) We support a whole of government approach to consultation that engages adequately and appropriately, not only with Māori rights holders and their representative organisations, but also with other organisations with demonstrably representative views of their communities.

(g) We submit that the Environment, Climate, Oceans & Fisheries and Conservation portfolios should be held by Cabinet Ministers to ensure they are consulted in Government decision-making.

(h) CTA recommends reviewing and strengthening the Environmental Protection Authority to ensure effective enforcement of environmental laws.

(i) We call on the government to ensure that resource management legislation delivers strong environmental protections such as Significant Natural Areas, Historic heritage, environmental bottom lines, mechanisms to meaningfully address cumulative effects, and direction to restore where nature is degraded.

Date of submission: 11 March 2026

Signature:



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Audrey van Ryn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Audrey van Ryn, Secretary, Civic Trust Auckland