

Information sheet for farmers

The rules for freshwater in Auckland are changing

This consultation on freshwater is now open and runs over four weeks until Monday 4 December 2023. You can read more on OurAuckland and see this this short video explainer.

Farmers and landowners will be among the groups affected by these changes. We'd like your feedback as we work to restore the health of our freshwater.

This information sheet is a summary of council's preliminary approach to identifying changes to the freshwater rules for rivers, lakes, streams, wetlands, aquifers (groundwater) and springs.

The government's approach

The government's National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 (NPS-FM) directs us to significantly improve freshwater health within a generation. It sets national bottom lines for freshwater health that we must meet and sits along other regulatory and voluntary initiatives for improving freshwater, such as freshwater farm plans.

Te mauri o te wai - our vision for freshwater in Auckland

Some of our rivers, lakes and streams aren't as healthy as they once were. If we don't manage land use activities better, water quality may get worse. We need to set objectives and specific, measurable targets to maintain and / or improve water quality.

Once we decide on our vision, values, and environmental outcomes, we can establish a baseline state (a benchmark in time) for attributes of our freshwater systems. From there, we can set targets. The NPS-FM specifies a range of attributes we need to use or consider. We are proposing to also include zinc and copper (in urban streams) and temperature (in all streams).

Potential management approaches are being reviewed

Across the rohe, we're aiming for one set of rules, with integrated and consistent planning provisions. Bespoke and/or targeted management responses, processes, and provisions will be used where needed to protect special sites and features. Management tools may include regulatory limits on resource use (land use controls, input controls and output controls in the AUP), and non-regulatory action plans and other voluntary measures such as investment programmes, and actions by the council.

There may also be some changes to the limits we set on certain activities, and how we monitor progress.

How Freshwater Farm Plans fit in

Freshwater Farm Plans are a practical way for farmers and growers to demonstrate how they are managing the impact of their operations on the freshwater environment. They will be gradually phased in across Tāmaki Makaurau from late 2024 and will be a key method for implementing the NPS-FM, along with rules in the Auckland Unitary Plan (AUP) and non-regulatory action plans. Many farmers already have a farm environment plan or are part of an industry programme. Freshwater Farm Plans will build on that work.



How water quality is measured

An **'attribute'** is essentially something that can be measured and monitored. It tells you about the state of a freshwater system. The compulsory attributes in the NPS-FM relate to water quality, habitats, ecological processes, aquatic life, and water quantity.

- **Suspended sediment** in our waterways makes our estuaries muddier, makes waterways less appealing to swim in, and makes it harder for native plants and animals in the water to survive. Over half our region's rivers and streams are better than the national bottom line for suspended sediment, but there are still high levels of sediment in many of them.
- ***E. coli*** is an indicator for bacteria and viruses in the water that can make us sick. The higher the levels of *E. coli*, the greater the risk of getting sick when swimming in or drinking untreated water. Levels of *E. coli* contamination are generally high in the region's rivers and streams, meaning potential human health risks are widespread.
- **Nutrients** such as nitrogen (including nitrate and ammonia) and phosphorus are essential for plant and animal growth, but in large amounts cause excess plant growth. They reduce oxygen in the water and increase soil and water toxicity. In the Pukekohe Special Vegetable Growing Area, several streams have nitrate concentrations worse than the national bottom lines.

Potential changes to limits, actions, and measures

The AUP has a comprehensive range of provisions that aim to protect Tāmaki Makaurau's water resources, including objectives, policies, rules and other methods. In 2022 we assessed the effectiveness of the AUP provisions in meeting its stated freshwater objectives. We concluded that while AUP provisions address all the relevant matters, waterways are still degrading. This means that we need to make improvements.

- **Stock exclusion** is keeping stock away from waterways, wetlands, and off highly erodible land. This is one of the most effective tools we have for improving water quality and habitats. There are already AUP rules and national regulations for keeping stock out of waterways, but they don't cover many small streams in steeper areas, which contribute a lot of sediment and *E. coli*.
- **Discharges** to freshwater include things like stormwater runoff and dairy farm effluent. We can put greater controls on discharges, to avoid them altogether or to ensure any discharges get the best treatment possible before they reach waterways.
- **Riparian vegetation** (the plants and trees along the water margins and banks) is essential for healthy water. It provides the cool, shady habitats freshwater ecosystems need. The existing rules may not be providing enough space for riparian vegetation to establish and thrive around waterways.
- We may need to strengthen the **on-site wastewater provisions** in the AUP to be consistent with the performance standards in the council's updated guidance document for on-site wastewater and address some of the consenting barriers to upgrading onsite systems.
- We may also need to change the existing approach to **sediment-generating activities**, to prefer approaches that minimise land disturbance and have a greater soil conservation focus.
- A **fish passage action plan** is being prepared to ensure that in-stream structures enable the passage of fish.

We may also need to review existing **water permit allocations**. We know that there are some over-allocations of water already occurring in our aquifers. Revised flows, levels and take limits will need to ensure that water is available to reliably meet reasonable irrigation, pastoral farming, food processing, commercial and industrial needs.

Have your say

To read more about the proposed changes go to AKHaveyoursay.nz/freshwaterakl or scan the QR code to give your feedback



Supporting information includes a discussion document, an online feedback form, and a printable feedback form to email or freepost. Copies of the discussion document and feedback forms are available at council libraries.

Feedback received will be processed and a report made to decision makers. All personal details provided by you will remain private. A summary of feedback related to the consultation will be publicly available in early 2024.