

Ecosystem health factsheet

Essential Freshwater is part of a new national direction to protect and improve our rivers, streams, lakes and wetlands. The Essential Freshwater package aims to:

- stop further degradation of our freshwater
- start making immediate improvements so water quality improves within five years
- reverse past damage to bring our waterways and ecosystems to a healthy state within a generation.

Te Mana o te Wai is fundamental to all freshwater management

Te Mana o te Wai recognises the vital importance of water. It expresses the special connection that New Zealanders have with freshwater. By protecting the health of freshwater, we protect the health and well-being of people and our ecosystems. When managing freshwater, Te Mana o te Wai ensures the health and well-being of the water is protected before providing for human needs or enabling other uses of water. Through discussions with regional councils, tangata whenua and communities will have a say on how Te Mana o te Wai is applied in freshwater management locally. More information can be found in the [Te Mana o te Wai factsheet](#).

Who should read this factsheet

This factsheet is part of a [series](#) and provides information on the new policies for ecosystem health in the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 (NPS-FM 2020). It is primarily intended for council staff but may also be of interest to land users, iwi, the wider agricultural industry, farm advisors and consultants, and anyone else with an interest in freshwater policy.

What are the policies?

Ecosystem health is one of four compulsory values in the NPS-FM 2020. More information about other values is available in the [Values and attributes factsheet](#).

The NPS-FM 2020 describes ecosystem health in terms of its five components:

- **water quality** and its physical and chemical properties (eg, temperature, dissolved oxygen, suspended sediment, nutrients, and toxic contaminants)
- **water quantity**, including the variability in the level or flow of water
- **habitat**, including river banks and margins, connections to floodplains and to groundwater
- **aquatic life** (eg, microbes, invertebrates, plants, fish and birds)
- **ecological processes** such as the natural cycling of nutrients.

Regional councils must ensure their freshwater management units support healthy ecosystems appropriate to the type of freshwater body. This means setting environmental outcomes for each of these five components, which, when achieved, fulfil the relevant long-term visions for freshwater in the region.

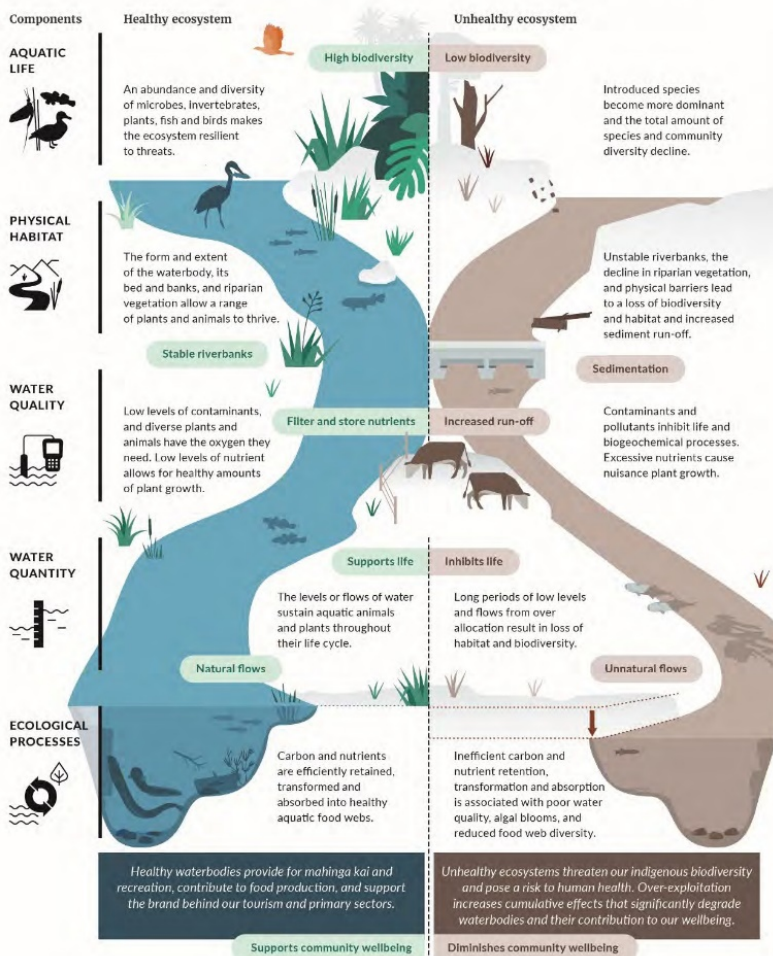
When do the policies apply?

Councils need to notify their plans by 31 December 2024, with final decisions made and plans operational no more than two years later (or three years if they are granted an extension).

Why these policies?

Freshwater ecosystem health

This diagram shows the five components that contribute to freshwater ecosystem health.



The description of ecosystem health in the NPS-FM 2017 listed several matters that councils should consider for a healthy freshwater ecosystem, but the policies were focused on water quality and water quantity. The effect was that the management of freshwater could be fragmented and may not have considered the other important components for ecosystem health of habitat, aquatic life and ecological processes.

More about the Essential Freshwater package

An overview of the Essential Freshwater package, including when different aspects commence or must be implemented, can be found in this [summary and milestones](#).

The package includes several new national rules and regulations including:

- new [National Environmental Standards for Freshwater](#)
- new [stock exclusion regulations](#) under section 360 of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA)
- amendments to the [Resource Management \(Measurement and Reporting of Water Takes\) Regulations 2010](#)
- the [National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020](#), which replaces the NPS-FM 2017
- [amendments to the RMA](#), to provide for a faster freshwater planning process
- [amendments to the RMA](#), to enable mandatory and enforceable freshwater farm plans and the creation of regulations for reporting nitrogen fertiliser sales.

Factsheets in this series

The full set of Essential Freshwater factsheets is available on our [website](#).

Find out more and give us feedback

Contact us by emailing freshwater@mfe.govt.nz, or visit the [Essential Freshwater page](#) on our website.

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Published in December 2020 by the
Ministry for the Environment with input from the Ministry for Primary Industries
Publication number: INFO 997