To do this, councils, communities and iwi need:

- good information to support decisions on fresh water in their region
- good processes for deciding how to manage fresh water
- protection of values that are important to all New Zealanders
- good information on the values they choose and the impacts of those choices.

To make this happen, the Government is proposing some additions to the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management (NPS-FM).

Existing requirements of the NPS-FM

The NPS-FM already requires regional councils to:

- maintain or improve overall water quality within a region
- safeguard the life-supporting capacity, ecosystem processes and indigenous species (including their associated ecosystems) of fresh water
- set freshwater objectives and limits for all water bodies.

These requirements will still be in the NPS-FM alongside the proposed additions.

Proposal 6: Tāngata whenua values

Māori have a special relationship with fresh water, so it’s important that this is recognised. The proposed changes more clearly articulate tāngata whenua values for fresh water, including Te Mana o te Wai. Tāngata whenua values are also part of the National Objectives Framework so they must be considered as part of decisions on managing fresh water. For example, regional councils, iwi and communities will need to consider whether they should manage a water body for mahinga kai.

Proposal 7: Monitoring

These proposed changes would make it clear that regional councils need to identify a range of representative sites in waterways at which to monitor progress towards, or achievement of, freshwater objectives. The additions also recognise that water quality needs to be monitored over long-term trends.

Have your say

It’s important we get this right as part of New Zealand’s long term vision for improving the way we manage our fresh water, so we want to hear from you. You can have your say on the Government’s proposals to amend the NPS-FM by making a written submission:

- online at www.mfe.govt.nz, or
- by email to watersubmissions@mfe.govt.nz, or
- by posting it to Freshwater Reform, Ministry for the Environment, PO Box 10362, Wellington.

Submissions need to be received by 5pm on 4 February 2014. Further details on making a submission can be found in section 7 of Proposed Amendments to the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2011: A Discussion document. This can be found at www.mfe.govt.nz along with supporting studies and other material.

If you have questions, email: watercomments@mfe.govt.nz

If the proposed changes to the NPS-FM go ahead, there may be some changes to regional plans. So get involved with your regional council and be part of the conversation on the implications of choices made under the NPS-FM in your region.
Proposal 1: Accounting for water quality and quantity
(Section 4.1 in the discussion document)

New Zealand needs a better understanding of what goes into our water and how much water is used so that we can manage it better.

The proposed changes to the NPS-FM will mean that regional councils know about all water takes and where contaminants are coming from. This information will help councils and communities make better decisions about how to manage fresh water. This information will also tell us whether there is headroom to use more of our freshwater resource, or whether we are already using more than the system can cope with sustainably.

Proposal 2: National Objectives Framework
(Section 4.2 in the discussion document)

The proposed National Objectives Framework will help councils and communities better provide for the things they value most about fresh water. The framework provides:

- a list of values for communities to choose from to reflect what is important to them (eg, fishing, irrigation)
- a list of the attributes that affect water quality (eg, E. coli bacteria, periphyton (slime), etc)
- the technical details that a council can use in their regional plans to provide for the community’s values (eg, what level of E. coli is acceptable for boating and wading)
- a process for setting freshwater objectives.

The framework will help communities discuss what to set freshwater objectives to provide for the community’s values. If the community wants to improve water quality but it will cost a lot and require changes to land use, then the community may need to set a long timeframe to adjust or, in exceptional cases, seek a transitional arrangement. This may mean that it will take longer to see improvements in water quality, but it also means less disruption to resource users.

Disagreements about the science add costs and delays, and often end up in the courts. So the framework will provide a way of deciding on exceptions to the bottom lines. The proposed grounds for exceptions are where a water body breaches a bottom line due to:

- natural conditions of the water body, eg, a native bird colony nesting above a river which puts E. coli bacteria in the river
- significant existing infrastructure (eg, a dam) that affects a water body.

Proposal 3: Compulsory values
(Section 4.3 in the discussion document)

Some of the values of fresh water are so important to New Zealanders that they should be provided for in all waterways. We all want our water to be healthy for aquatic life, and we want to be able to use it for recreation.

That’s why the Government is proposing to make ecosystem health and human health for secondary contact recreation (eg, boating and wading) national values that must be protected across New Zealand. Communities can choose other values for their waterways too.

Proposal 4: National bottom lines
(Section 4.4 in the discussion document)

The proposed changes add numeric bottom lines for the national values (ecosystem health and human health) so that everyone knows what level of water quality is needed to provide for them.

The quality of most of our waterways is already above these bottom lines. Communities will have to plan how to improve the health of the unacceptably degraded waterways over a manageable timeframe.

The NPS-FM already requires councils to maintain or improve the overall water quality in each region, so setting national bottom lines won’t allow waterways that are in good shape to be degraded down.

Proposal 5: Exceptions to national bottom lines
(Section 4.5 in the discussion document)

For a few waterways, it will not be possible to meet national bottom lines even over a long timeframe, so the proposed changes provide a way of deciding on exceptions to the bottom lines. The proposed grounds for exceptions are:

- natural conditions of the water body, eg, a native bird colony nesting above a river which puts E. coli bacteria in the river
- historical activities that have created impacts on water quality that can’t reasonably be fixed, even in the long term, without creating even worse environmental effects
- significant existing infrastructure (eg, a dam) that affects a water body.

Exceptions for natural conditions and historical impacts would be decided as part of regional planning. Exceptional infrastructure exceptions would be decided by the Government after public consultation.

Questions? Email: watercomments@mfe.govt.nz