



# The New Planning System

## *Backing our primary sector*

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### Simpler planning to support farmers

New Zealand's new planning system will be clearer and more consistent. It will let farmers do what they do best and boost our primary sector while protecting the environment.

#### Two new Bills with clear roles

The new planning system is set out in two new Bills. Once passed, these will replace the current Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA):

- **The Planning Bill** lays out the framework for how land can be used and developed.
- **The Natural Environment Bill** is focused on managing the use of natural resources and protecting the environment.

**The new planning system is made up of more than just new Bills.** National instruments – including national policy directions and standards – will provide specific requirements for councils to develop their plans and make consenting decisions. This will lead to simpler and more predictable decisions that support long-term investment and give confidence to grow thriving rural businesses. The new planning system will include helpful changes made under recent changes to the RMA.

### Making it easier to farm: What's changing

The proposed new planning system will remove unnecessary compliance barriers and gives farmers more certainty and flexibility to get on with the job. Here's some of what's changing:

- **Fewer unnecessary rules**  
The new system removes rules that aren't needed. Regulation focuses on real environmental risks, not minor or low-impact activity, so farmers can spend more time on the land and less time in paperwork.

- **Consistent rules nationwide**  
Planning processes will be simpler and more predictable, with clear, consistent national rules that support long-term investment and give confidence to grow thriving rural businesses.
- **Focus on what matters**  
You only need to manage effects from your farming that are ‘minor or more than minor’, unlike the RMA. Effects are the impacts caused by activities like nutrient runoff, water taking or noise. Under the new planning system, you won’t need to take extra steps to control small, barely noticeable effects unless they add up to something bigger.
- **Early planning and decision-making**  
Councils and farmers are encouraged to plan ahead and make decisions before problems arise, helping avoid costly fixes later.
- **Relief for some major impacts on you**  
You may be able to get fair and practical relief when planning controls limit how land can be used, acknowledging the real economic and personal impact on farming families.
- **Clear environmental limits**  
Limits for natural resources like air, water, land and indigenous biodiversity will be set and monitored to protect people’s health and the environment. If a limit is exceeded, councils will need to take action to get the resource use back within the limit.
- **Less red tape and restrictions for low-risk farming**  
Rules will be proportionate to the level of risk. If a resource is running out, rules can be stricter, but voluntary and farmer-led tools must be considered first.

Decisions in the new planning system will work like a funnel. Clear goals at the top, then national directions and standards narrow what’s up for debate from there. This means decisions stick, and farmers and communities can have certainty.

## Property rights and relief

### Property rights

The new planning system is based on the right to use your property. Both Bills have statutory ‘goals’ that the system needs to achieve, and rules that limit what councils can regulate.

- Under the **Planning Bill**, land uses are generally allowed unless there is a specific rule about the use. If what a farmer is doing on their land doesn’t meaningfully affect others or the environment, they should be able to get on and do it.
- Under the **Natural Environment Bill**, natural resources like water can only be used if you have a permit, or the use is allowed by a plan or national standard. It’s likely that more activities will be managed by standards, and freshwater farm plans will have a key role.

## Relief, in some cases where land use is restricted

You may be able to get ‘relief’ if particular planning controls or rules have a big impact on how you can use your land. This includes rules about:

- land-based indigenous biodiversity and significant natural areas
- significant historic heritage, and sites of significance to Māori
- outstanding natural features and landscapes
- areas of high natural character within the coastal environment, wetlands, lakes and rivers and their margins.

Relief could include things like cash payments, lower rates, extra development rights, no-fee consents, or land swaps. A new Planning Tribunal will be established and can help if you and the council can’t agree on what relief you should get. Under the planning system, relief will be triggered for lower-level impacts to you than under the RMA.

## Resource use and environmental limits

Under the RMA, there haven’t always been clear, binding limits for things like clean air, water, land, or native species. Sometimes this has meant resources were overused, making them harder to fix later.

Under the new planning system, binding environmental limits will make it clear where the boundaries are for impact on resources and people.

- **Human health limits** will be set nationally, by the Government (guided by health advice).
- **Ecosystem health limits** will be set by councils using national standards and good data. These cover air, freshwater, coastal water, land and soils, and indigenous biodiversity.
- The Government can specify minimum levels for ecosystem health limits. However, there may be circumstances where a council and community consider it appropriate to set less stringent limits to those set by the Government. This is possible provided a justification report is prepared.
- **All environmental limits** will be applied to specific areas (called management units). These will be shaped by what communities want for their area, and decision-makers must balance people’s health and the natural environment with the economic needs of the region.

If a limit is exceeded or broken, councils must prepare an action plan showing how they will manage things back within the limit and over what period. If there is no risk of breaking a limit there will be fewer rules for you to follow.

Some recent changes to the RMA will carry through to the new planning system, as well as changes to national direction.

## Tools for staying within limits

Voluntary and farmer-led tools will be used wherever possible, with stronger rules used only when needed. The tools include:

- voluntary action and catchment groups – when resources are not under pressure
- freshwater farm plans – flexible and farmer-led, helping farmers identify environmental risks on their farm and then plan practical actions to manage these
- action plans (led by councils) – for getting back within a limit when it's been breached
- land-use controls – place restrictions on some activities (for example, vegetation clearance, diffuse discharge or earthworks)
- charging and market mechanisms for resource allocation – can be turned on by regulations and incentivise good on-farm practices.

## Certainty while the system changes

To give people certainty through transition, any expiring RMA resource consents will be extended until at least mid-2031. This will include those that have recently expired and a new application has been made. Consent holders will have flexibility to either apply for replacement consents under the transitional regime or wait until the new planning system is in place.

## What happens next?

Before they become law, the public gets to have a say about the new Bills through select committee hearings in early 2026 – this is an opportunity to make improvements.

Once the Bills are in place, the next step is to confirm the national instruments needed to guide spatial planning. People will also get a chance to submit on this. There will be transitional arrangements for existing resource consent holders:

1. All consents under the RMA will be extended until at least mid-2031.
2. You can obtain a new consent under the transitional system from mid-2026.
3. A new National Policy Statement – Freshwater will be introduced by mid-2026, which will assist anyone who wishes to obtain a new consent early.

The first spatial plans are expected within a set period after the law is enacted. Government hopes to have the transitional system up and running in the middle of 2026, and the full system working by 2029.

For more information, visit [environment.govt.nz](https://environment.govt.nz).

