



Updating National Direction: Changes to the National Environmental Standards for Commercial Forestry

May 2026

Changes have been made to national direction under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) to help the resource management system work more effectively.

The changes to the National Environmental Standards for Commercial Forestry (NES-CF) are designed to make requirements clearer and more consistent across New Zealand, reduce unnecessary cost and uncertainty for forestry owners and operators, and focus efforts on higher-risk situations to manage environmental risk.

Context

The NES-CF sets nationally consistent regulations for commercial forestry activities on areas of one hectare or more to manage the effects of commercial forestry across the country.

Some parts of the previous NES-CF were increasing costs and uncertainty for forestry owners and operators, with some requirements being out of proportion with the environmental risks they were intended to manage. Concerns were also raised regarding variable interpretation of the regulations, and that some recent additions (such as slash removal standards and additional planning requirements) were difficult and expensive to apply in practice.

The Government has amended the NES-CF to improve national consistency, reduce compliance costs, remove duplication of regulations, and provide greater certainty for operators. This is intended to boost productivity and ensure environmental risks are appropriately managed.

Key changes

Key changes to the NES-CF

- Clarify when councils can have more stringent rules than the NES-CF.
 - Amend regulation 6(1)(a) to be more specific about when councils can have stricter rules (focused on severe erosion risk, mapped and evidence-based).
 - Repeal regulation 6(4A) so that it can no longer be used by councils to control aspects of afforestation (including location).
- Replace prescriptive slash regulations with a risk-based approach.
 - Move from a ‘one-size-fits-all’ slash size/volume limit (which is costly and hard to measure and enforce, and captures low-risk harvest areas).
 - Require a Slash Mobilisation Risk Assessment (SMRA) for higher-risk land, so effort is concentrated where the risk and consequences are highest.
- Remove duplication in afforestation/replanting planning requirements.
 - Remove the requirement for a replanting plan, and keep streamlined afforestation plans (with reduced content) where they add compliance value (such as mapping/setbacks).
- Fix minor wording issues that created confusion.
 - Remove the undefined term, ‘woody debris’ from plan requirements.
 - Clarify wilding conifer documentation requirements.
 - Correct a wording error in regulation 71A (‘not’ was included in error).
- Updated documents incorporated by reference.

Clarify when councils can have more stringent rules than the NES-CF

The amendments narrow when councils can have rules that are more stringent than the national standards. This is intended to increase national consistency, while still enabling councils to make plan changes to manage high-risk situations, matters of national importance and unique and sensitive environments.

Regulation 6(1)(a) has been changed so councils can only have stricter rules in specific, high-risk circumstances. These include managing the risk of severe erosion in a defined area that would have significant adverse effects on downstream infrastructure, property, or receiving environments, including the coastal environment. The change also requires the area to be clearly mapped (at 1:10,000 scale or using a 1m digital elevation model) and supported by evidence through the plan change process. These requirements will make it clearer when and why stricter local rules are justified.

Regulation 6(4A) has been repealed. This regulation enabled councils to control aspects of afforestation, including where new forests can be planted. The potential for regional variation of afforestation rules had previously created uncertainty for landowners, undermining the purpose of a national standard.

These changes are intended to increase certainty and reduce costs for forestry operators to engage in plan change processes. At the same time, councils will still be able to respond where severe erosion risk is clearly identified and supported by evidence.

Replace prescriptive slash regulations with a risk-based approach

The changes (to regulations 69(5)–(7)) replace the current ‘one-size-fits-all’ slash¹ removal requirements with a risk-based approach. Instead of requiring slash removal based on set sizes, the regulations now require a Slash Mobilisation Risk Assessment (SMRA) of the harvest area (the ‘cutover’) for higher-risk land (orange and permitted red zone). [Guidelines for the SMRA](#) will be incorporated by reference to the NES-CF. The assessment must be completed at the time of forest harvest as part of the existing harvesting management plan requirement.

The SMRA will set out what is needed at an individual site. If the assessment shows low risk of slash moving off the harvest area, slash would be managed through the harvesting plan and the permitted activity conditions for slash management. (See regulations 69(1–4) and Schedule 6(4)(4).)

If the SMRA determines a higher risk of slash moving off the harvest area, a resource consent will be required to tailor mitigations to the site and likely downstream impacts. The consenting process will determine what controls are required (for example, changing harvest practices or removing slash).

This risk-based approach will reduce cost and consenting for low-risk sites, while enabling tailored resource consent conditions where there is a higher risk of downstream harm.

Reducing duplicative requirements for afforestation and replanting plans

The amendments remove the requirement for replanting plans. Existing permitted activity conditions remain to manage the environmental risks associated with replanting a harvested forest. This can include establishing setbacks from water bodies and significant natural areas, and carrying out a wilding tree risk assessment.

The regulations will retain a requirement for afforestation plans, but less information is required than previously. Foresters will no longer need to provide information on the long-term predicted effects, which are based on assumptions that may not be valid at a future harvest. Requirements to demonstrate the forester is complying with afforestation requirements, such as property details and mapping requirements for setbacks, still apply.

The changes will reduce unnecessary paperwork and compliance costs, while keeping a requirement for an afforestation plan as a practical compliance check for key matters, reducing compliance efforts and costs.

Fix minor wording issues

A small number of drafting issues have been corrected to remove confusion, without changing the overall policy settings. They include:

- Removing references to ‘woody debris’ from schedules 3, 4, 5 and 6. The term is not defined in the NES-CF and is not needed. The regulations already define and use ‘slash’.

¹ Slash is defined under the NES-CF as ‘woody debris generated by forestry harvesting and associated activities, including branches, tree tops, off-cuts, and pieces of logs, that are not removed from the site after harvest’

- Clarifying the wilding conifer documentation requirements in regulations 11(4)(b) and 79(5)(b) to make it clear what information must be supplied to councils (the wilding tree risk calculator score, calculations, and supporting evidence) and when it must be provided (at the same time as the relevant notice).
- Correcting a drafting error in regulation 71A(b) by removing the word 'not'. This fixes unintended wording that made the permitted activity rules for low-intensity harvesting unclear.

Updated documents incorporated by reference

The amendments also updates the following documents incorporated by reference in the NES-CF:

- The [Land Use Capability Survey Handbook, 3rd Edition](#) is updated, as the NES-CF refers to erosion types defined in this document.
- The [Slash Mobilisation Risk Assessment](#) is added. This document outlines the process required under section 69(5) of the NES-CF to screen proposed harvesting activities for the risk of slash mobilising from the forest cutover for certain land with higher susceptibility to erosion.
- The electronic reference to the [Regional Flood Estimation Tool for New Zealand Part 2](#) is updated.

Implementation considerations

For local government

When the NES-CF amendments come into effect (28 days after amendments are gazetted), councils will need to amend district plans if a rule duplicates or conflicts with a provision in the NES-CF as soon as practicable without using the process in Schedule 1. This will need to be done for rules no longer enabled through regulations 6(1)(a) and 6(4A) of the NES-CF.

National environmental standards apply directly to activities. This means the RMA 'plan stop' requirements do not apply to the NES-CF amendments (see the Ministry for the Environment website's page on [Understanding Plan Stop](#)).

Councils will also need to consider and apply the amended NES-CF when processing resource consent applications for commercial forestry activities.

For industry

Forestry operators should check what the amended NES-CF means for their activities. Existing compliance, monitoring and enforcement obligations remain. These changes to the NES-CF are expected to reduce cost and uncertainty for forestry businesses while retaining controls to manage any adverse effects of commercial forestry activities.

In practice, forestry operators can apply the updated permitted activity and consenting rules from the commencement date. Any operator that is harvesting in orange zone and permitted red zone will need to complete an SMRA as part of harvest planning, so they manage identified risks and apply for a resource consent where required.

They can also update their processes for the streamlined afforestation plan requirements and remove replanting plans. If, at the date the amendments come into effect, notice has been given of a planned harvesting operation, transitional provisions are set out in Schedule 1 of the NES-CF.

Transition to the new planning system

All existing national direction under the RMA will be assessed and restructured to ensure it aligns with the goals and framework of the new planning system that will be established by the Planning and Natural Environment Bills. The policy intent of the changes to national direction under the existing RMA will transfer to the new system as appropriate.

For more information about the transition into the new planning system see the Ministry for the Environment fact sheet [The New Planning System: Transitioning into the new planning system](#).

For further information

For more information, see:

[National Environmental Standards for Commercial Forestry | Ministry for the Environment](#)

[National Environmental Standards for Commercial Forestry | Ministry for Primary Industries](#)

