



Updating National Direction: Changes to the National Environmental Standards for Marine Aquaculture

April 2026

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

Amendments to the National Environmental Standards for Marine Aquaculture (NES-MA) support greater productivity and innovation in the aquaculture sector by making consenting and certain changes to consent conditions easier, and by better enabling research or trial activities.

Context

The NES-MA sets nationally consistent environmental rules for marine aquaculture, enabling appropriate development while protecting sensitive coastal and marine environments and supporting sustainable management under the RMA.

Aquaculture consenting processes under the previous NES-MA were often costly, complex and disproportionate – especially for minor changes within existing operations. This created uncertainty and reduced flexibility for marine farmers to improve management, adopt new technology and respond to changing environmental and market conditions. Previous reviews of the NES-MA and stakeholder engagement identified technical issues and unintended barriers to small-scale, short-term research and trials, which have been addressed in these amendments.

In addition, the NES-MA has been amended to set more enabling activity status for certain changes to consent conditions and enable new regulatory pathways for research and trial activities on existing farms and in new spaces. These changes will streamline consenting (activity status, notification, and matters for councils to consider) while maintaining environmental safeguards and upholding Treaty settlements.

Key changes

Key changes to the NES-MA

- Define ‘research or trial activity’ – new definition.
- Expand where the NES-MA applies – to include replacement consents, certain applications to change or cancel consent conditions, and research and trial applications (Regulation 11).
- New controlled activity conditions for aquaculture-related research and trials in new locations (Regulations R17, R18 and R19).
- Allow broader changes to or cancellation of monitoring conditions – via a new restricted discretionary pathway (Regulations R34 and R35).
- Enable additional structure types through a controlled activity pathway (Regulation R32).
- Adjust finfish species-change provisions – adding matters of control for effects on water quality and information, monitoring and reporting when adding finfish to an existing finfish farm (Regulation R31 for applications under Regulation R30).
- Better management of *Undaria* within existing consents (Regulation R30 amended to carve out *Undaria*; and a new Regulation R31 for *Undaria* decision matters).
- Technical and clarification amendments (including clearer notification wording, removing redundant cross-references, and alignment tweaks) (Regulations 22, 24, 44; plus Schedule 6 consequential changes).

Defining ‘research or trial activity’

A new definition of ‘research or trial activity’ has been added to the NES-MA. This makes it clearer what kinds of activities can be done within the research/trial rules, and to reduce the chance the pathway is used for activities that are not genuinely short-term research or testing.

Expanding where the NES-MA applies

The amendments mean the NES-MA applies in more situations. The NES-MA will now apply to certain applications to change or cancel consent conditions, and research and trial applications. This will make sure these applications are dealt with under a consistent national approach, and fix gaps that were causing uncertainty or unnecessary hurdles.

New controlled activity pathway for aquaculture-related research or trials in new locations

The amendments add a new consent pathway for research or trial activities in new locations that involve only structures or equipment, and that meet set conditions. These proposals will be treated as controlled activities. This is to make it easier to run trials and support innovation, while still allowing councils to set conditions to manage any effects.

Proposed amendments to make aquaculture research or trial activities in new locations a permitted activity have not been progressed. This is because activities in new areas can have different effects depending on the site. Keeping a consent requirement helps make sure councils can check likely effects (including on sensitive environments and other users) before the activity starts.

Allowing broader changes to or cancellation of monitoring conditions

The amendments make it easier for consent holders to apply to change or remove monitoring conditions. Applications to change monitoring conditions now sit under a restricted discretionary pathway, so councils can consider the relevant issues and set updated conditions. The aim is to let monitoring keep up with new science, technology and good practice, while making sure it still suits the local environment.

Enabling additional structure types through a controlled activity pathway

The amendments let existing marine farm consent holders apply to add two more types of structures by changing their consent conditions, using a controlled activity pathway, enabling farms to transfer and adapt to innovative methods of farming. This will reduce time and cost for changes that stay within an existing operation, while still allowing councils to set conditions to manage any effects.

Adjusting finfish species-change provisions

The amendments will provide for consent holders to apply to add finfish to an existing farm, provided they meet council conditions including strengthened requirements for information, monitoring, and reporting. These amendments will improve environmental safeguards and ensure decisions are based on enough information about water quality effects and how those effects will be checked and managed.

Better management of *Undaria* within existing consents

The amendments allow the invasive species *Undaria pinnatifida* to be added to an existing consent through a restricted discretionary approach, with new decision matters specifically for *Undaria*. This will maintain council discretion (including for biosecurity risks) while giving clearer guidance on what needs to be considered for proposals involving this species.

Technical and clarification amendments

Technical changes have also been made to make the NES-MA easier to use. This includes clearer wording for notification, removing repeat or unnecessary cross-references, and small alignment changes across definitions, regulations and schedules.

Implementation considerations

For local government

Once the NES-MA comes into effect (28 days after amendments are gazetted), decision-makers must apply the amendments when making decisions on resource consents. This includes applying any revised activity statuses, notification settings, and the matters councils may consider (such as for controlled/restricted discretionary pathways).

National environmental standards apply directly to a relevant activity, so the RMA 'plan stop' requirements do not apply to the NES-MA amendments (see the Ministry for the Environment website's page on [Understanding Plan Stop](#)).

Councils, however, will be required to incorporate the NES-MA amendments into their plans over time where plan rules duplicate or conflict with NES provisions. Until plans are amended, the NES-MA takes precedence and applies directly to relevant activities.

For industry

Consent applicants and holders of existing consent for marine aquaculture activities should check what the NES-MA requires for their activity (for example, the activity status, notification rules and what councils can consider). They will also need to check their regional coastal plan to make sure their consent meets all requirements. Some applicants may have small one-off costs to update their application, if updates are needed to comply with the amended regulations.

If an activity is now allowed through a more enabling pathway (for example, controlled, restricted discretionary, or permitted in some cases), marine aquaculture consent holders will still need to meet any conditions and requirements. Ongoing compliance, monitoring and enforcement obligations still remain.

Transition to the new planning system

All existing national direction under the RMA will be reassessed 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 be transferred 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 Marine Aquaculture | Ministry for the Environment](#)

[National environmental standards for marine aquaculture | Ministry for Primary Industries](#)

