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I have written to you, because I feel that there is an urgent need to address three recent initiatives – Environmental Reporting, Freshwater Reforms and National Monitoring Project. All these initiatives are considered to exhibit one common failure:

Lack of attention given to environmental outcomes in the urban environment

This is reflected in the proposed *Environmental Reporting Bill 2014*, which does not appear to contain any criteria specifically relevant to urban areas, where approximately 86%<sup>1</sup> of New Zealanders live, work and play.

The definition for ‘environment’ provided in the *Resource Management Act 1991* is wide ranging and goes far beyond biophysical indicators (which previous State of the Environment Reports have concentrated on) to include people and their communities, amenity values and aesthetic and cultural conditions. Statistics currently collected by the Ministry for the Environment and Statistics New Zealand cover only a fraction of possible environmental indicators.

It appears the new reporting bill will provide no specific information on:

- Losses in urban biodiversity and open space;
- Effects on amenity values from changes in the urban environment;
- Extent of land investigated and identified as being at natural hazard risk, including rising sea levels, flooding, slope stability and liquefaction.
- Changing characteristics in the urban environment, such as house type, average house/lot size, open space provision, hours of access to direct sunlight and housing density;
- Water quality of streams, rivers and lakes which pass through highly urbanised catchments; and
- Loss of older buildings, particularly heritage buildings.

An earlier report by the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment in 1996 titled ‘*Historic and Cultural Heritage Management in New Zealand*’ revealed New Zealand’s abysmal record in heritage protection and led to historic heritage being upgraded to a matter of national importance in section 6 of the RMA in 2003.

Despite evidence of past failures, weak central government support for heritage protection, and increased threats on heritage resources as a result of increasing awareness of earthquake risk, no organisation is effectively monitoring the state of the country’s heritage resources. For example, no checks have been put in place, to ensure older buildings have ever been investigated for their heritage values. As a result, more historical resources may be being demolished than is recorded by Councils or the Historic Places Trust.

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<sup>1</sup> 2006 Census Statistics New Zealand

It is impossible to see how planning and other legislation are performing, if effects in urban areas is not being collected or reported on. After all, the vast majority of resource consents and plan changes relate to urban development.

The proposed Freshwater Reforms are considered overly focused on the rural environment and rural industries and are considered to do little to address water problems experienced in urban areas. I recently prepared a report, which highlighted that a direct link between an increase in impervious surface areas (associated with the expansion of urban areas) and a decline in water quality has been established overseas in Britain, America and Australia. New legislation such as the *Housing Accord and Special Housing Areas Act 2013* have the ability to directly contribute to a decrease in water quality, if Local Government does not have the policies and provisions in place to require the active management of urban stormwater. A copy of this report is attached for your information. More research needs to be undertaken on the effects of urban stormwater and effective measures to manage it in the New Zealand context. Especially, given evidence of substantial damage (in the billions of dollars) caused by urban stormwater overseas.

The proposed National Monitoring Project is considered to be overly obsessed with time and cost analysis and fails to address, the ability of legislation and Council decisions to achieve the objectives of the RMA and regional/local planning policies. I consider there is an urgent need to investigate the effectiveness of plan policy, the absence of which leads to questions as to whether the right decision has been reached on resource consents granted. Why were only 0.56% of resource consents declined in New Zealand in 2010/2011<sup>2</sup> compared to 12% in England (between January and March 2013)<sup>3</sup>, over 20 times higher than the New Zealand rate of decline. This discrepancy could be explained by a number of reasons, ranging from two extreme positions of:

- Too much development with no or negligible effects requires resource consent in New Zealand; to
- Planning policies and provisions are too weak in New Zealand to justify the decline of consent.

As a former senior resource consent planner for Local Councils in England and Wales, I am of the view, that weak and unspecific/vague policies in New Zealand go a long way to explaining the difference in rates of decline. I am of the view that in the absence of local planning policies and rules which establish clear and unambiguous limits on development (and clearly explains the reasoning behind this), there is little ability to decline consent in New Zealand.

Some organisations have argued that the low rate of decline reflects improvements made to resource consents during the process of assessment (such as amendments or additional information) and the use of conditions to mitigation effects. Yet, there is no measurement of resource consents which are altered during the assessment process or the effectiveness of mitigation measures. In theory, most harmful effects are able to be mitigated to some degree. However, reality is likely to show a different story, where mitigation measures have been reduced/dropped due to costs, not monitored or enforced or maintained for a sufficient time period.

I remain disappointed in what appears to be the future shape of planning in New Zealand. If the political will is missing to adequately protect or maintain important features in rural or urban environments, we at least owe it to existing and future generations to record and monitor changes to these environments.

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<sup>2</sup> 53 Ministry for the Environment, Resource Management Act: Two-Yearly Survey of Local Authorities 2010/2011, published September 2011 <http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/rma/annual-survey/2010-2011/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> Statistic sourced from the English Department of Communities and Local Government Table 120 January to March 2013 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-planning-application-statistics>