



The policy bonfire of environment protection: 10 examples that threaten public health

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Summary

Examined together, the new Government's approach to environmental policy shows a clear pattern towards allowing more pollution of water, air, and climate. The implications for public health of these policy changes are significant, impacting communities' health directly and indirectly.

Aotearoa New Zealand experiences 3300 premature adult deaths per year as a result of air pollution and an estimated 34,000 people become ill from unsafe drinking water per year. Our communities are experiencing a wide range of harms from climate change-amplified storm events, including billions of dollars damage from Cyclone Gabrielle this year.

With health and well-being already seriously impacted by environmental degradation, the new Government must be asked why it would undo existing environmental protections, and what consequences this would have for our communities.

This Briefing examines the coalition agreements and identifies 10 environmental policy changes that could harm public health. All require regulatory impact statements to assess their impacts on public health before committing to implementing them.

Introduction

Environmental policies provide essential protections for people's health. Without evidence-informed, enforceable, and enforced protections for the environment, communities can be harmed by drinking contaminated water [1-3], breathing in polluted air [4] or being displaced, injured or killed as a result of vulnerability to the impacts of a climate change [5, 6].

Presently, Aotearoa New Zealand experiences 3300 premature adult deaths per year as a result of air pollution [7]. An estimated 34,000 people become ill from unsafe drinking water per year [8]. Our communities are experiencing a wide range of harms from climate change-amplified storm events, including billions of dollars damage from Cyclone Gabrielle this year and 11 deaths [6, 9].

Conversely, protections from environmental policies not only reduce the risk of harm but restoration of the natural environment can provide a multitude health benefits [10].

The new Government arrived just over two weeks ago with the signing of the coalition agreements between National and ACT, and National and NZ First. [These agreements present a significant number of changes to central government policy that are deeply concerning with regards to public health.](#) They demonstrate a clear direction for the new Government, which is to remove or weaken environmental protections, as well as encourage activities that risk damaging the health of the environment.

Here we highlight 10 ways the new Government's environmental policies pose serious risks to public health.

Detail on each of these policies is provided in the [Appendix](#) below. This list is by no means exhaustive. We have focused on policies that are very likely to result in more pollution to

water, air, and increased emissions.

Importantly, pollution is not the only cause of environmental degradation, nor is pollution the only risk to human health from poor environmental policy. For example, failing to invest in pest and weed control for our indigenous forests can lead to forest collapse, reducing carbon sequestration and contributing to biodiversity loss [11]. Draining wetlands reduces flood and drought resilience of landscapes [12]. Additionally, wetlands provide important “cleaning” of polluted water as they can remove excessive nutrients and trap sediment so their loss can lead to less safe and unhealthy water [13, 14]. Urban development that fails to take natural systems into account also contributes to a degraded, unhealthy environment and increases communities’ vulnerability to climate change impacts [15].

Environmental policies have major and wide-reaching implications for public health that can last decades. Therefore, the speed, breadth and direction of the new Government’s proposed changes are very concerning.

Environmental policies risking harm to public health

1. ***Reducing environmental protection by repealing the Natural And Built Environment Act 2023 (NBEA)***
2. ***Replacing the Resource Management Act (RMA) 1991 with policy that has “enjoyment of property rights as its guiding principle”.***
3. ***Rewriting the national freshwater policy, which is the strongest to date.***
4. ***Removing drinking water’s priority in the policy by “rebalancing” Te Mana o te Wai.***
5. ***Encouraging further carbon emissions through reinstating offshore oil and gas exploration.***
6. ***Increasing dependence on high emitting transport systems by repealing the Clean Car Discount.***
7. ***Reducing Auckland’s ability to transition to lower emissions systems by repealing its regional fuel tax.***
8. ***Reducing government spending on lower emissions (public and active) transport.***

9. ***Delaying regulation on agricultural emissions.***
10. ***Increasing the intensity of agricultural land use.***

Comment

Central government environmental policy plays a pivotal role in our communities' ability to respond to climate change, address environmental degradation and live healthy lives. Central government can coordinate regional efforts, develop national-scale responses (where needed), and provide regulatory protections where private interests may be undermining the interests and health of the public.

Proactive improvements in environmental health will always be less expensive than future remediation efforts. Moreover, restoration, mitigation and adaptation efforts will be significantly more challenging as climate change progresses and amplifies stressors on the environment and communities [16]. A key role for governments is to take a long-term perspective and move beyond short-term crisis management [17].

Given the strong evidence-base for its critical importance to long-term human health and well-being, and climate stability, most New Zealanders would expect to see the health of the environment given a high priority in government decision-making [18]. Such prioritisation would involve strengthening policies and legal measures to reinforce environmental protections and meet national and international goals, as well as investment in infrastructure that supports reducing our greenhouse gas emissions.

Our review of the coalition agreements and the commentary by some new ministers show that the new Government's policies are pointing in the opposite direction – towards fewer environmental protections, higher levels of harmful pollutants, and less focus on reducing climate change. Without strong environmental policies, many communities will struggle to safeguard fundamental needs, like safe drinking water, against private interests [3]. Without enforceable and enforced targets for restoration, our environment will continue to degrade. Without coordinated, equitable government leadership, all communities, but particularly communities with already low resources and deprivation, will struggle to respond to climate change impacts, and impacts will worsen if we continue beyond 1.5°C of warming [19]

What is new in this Briefing

- Changes to environmental policies outlined in the coalition agreements show a clear pattern towards reducing protection and allowing more pollution which has serious consequences for public health.
- Further policy announcements and commentary from Ministers follow this concerning trend.

Implications for policy

- The new coalition Government needs to produce regulatory impact statements for all its environmental policy changes that quantify their consequences for public health and sustainability.
- If the government takes public health fully into account, existing environmental protections and climate change responses would not be undone but strengthened.
- Proposed sectoral policies in agriculture and transport are inconsistent with stated climate goals and need to be reconsidered.

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Appendix: Detail on and analysis of each policy and its likely public health consequences

1. ***Reducing environmental protection by repealing the Natural And Built Environment Act 2023 (NBEA), and***
2. ***Replacing the Resource Management Act (RMA) 1991 with policy***

that has “enjoyment of property rights as its guiding principle”.

Both agreements indicate the new Government’s intention to take a major backwards step for health by repealing the NBEA (“before Christmas”). Additionally, the National-ACT agreement signals further erosion of RMA protections, saying they will rework resource management law to have “enjoyment of property rights as the guiding principle”.

The RMA is one of our most important health-related laws and the foundation of environmental protection. One of its main purposes is to protect communities from the health harms of pollution.

Poor implementation has meant the RMA partially failed in its purpose to avoid environmental degradation: increasing pollution has continued to degrade the natural systems since its establishment in 1991. Resulting health effects are unjustly distributed; and Māori rights, including to equitable health outcomes, have not been upheld.

The NBEA aimed to remedy these failures, by introducing bottom lines for the health of natural systems, strengthening references to human health, and ensuring partnerships with iwi and hapū.

3. *Replacing the national freshwater policy, which is the strongest to date.*

4. *Removing drinking water’s priority in the policy by “rebalancing” Te Mana o te Wai.*

Both of the coalition agreements state they will replace the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 (NPS-FM 2020). The NPS-FM 2020 is the country’s strongest protections for freshwater to date. It has improved bottom lines for pollutants that better reflect realistic ecosystem health needs after previous versions allowed for levels of pollution that led to extremely degraded ecosystems [20, 21].

The National-ACT agreement states an intention to “rebalance” Te Mana o te Wai, the policy’s decision-making framework. Te Mana o te Wai holds the health of waterways and communities’ drinking water must be addressed before councils can consider commercial uses of water. This framework is a huge step forward, as past policies pitted public interests against commercial interests, with public needs frequently losing to more well-resourced industry interests [3]. “Rebalancing” would mean a return to commercial interests undermining the needs of the public with regards to water.

5. *Encouraging further carbon emissions through reinstating offshore oil and gas exploration.*

National has said it supports the internationally agreed goal of limiting climate change to well below 2°C. Humanity is already nearing the global limit of carbon emissions consistent with meeting that goal [22]. This means we cannot fully exploit currently known reserves of fossil fuels, let alone search for new gas and oil [23].

Coalition partners, NZ First and ACT, have expressed opinions that make their support of this international agreement doubtful. [Most recently, NZ First Minister for Resources Shane Jones described concerns about climate change as “hysteria” and said the country shouldn’t “abandon gas and, if necessary, coal”.](#)

6. ***Increasing dependence on high emitting transport systems by repealing the Clean Car Discount.***
7. ***Reducing Auckland’s ability to transition to lower emissions systems by repealing its regional fuel tax.***
8. ***Reducing government spending on lower emissions (public and active) transport.***

Transport is a major contributor to New Zealand’s greenhouse gas emissions as well as [adverse health outcomes](#) [24]. Improving public and active transport, and reducing reliance on fossil fuels, is essential to reduce emissions and meet our international obligations.

The coalition agreements include a “repeal of the Clean Car Discount” (with the Parliament actually changing the law on 14 December) and National previously signalled [amendments to the “Clean Car Standard”](#) with the aim of “catering to sectors like farming”. The repeal of the discount and any loosening of standards will, collectively, perpetuate the importation of large and inefficient vehicles that contribute to air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions and slow the uptake of electric vehicles.

Other indications are that low carbon modes of travel will likely have their funding reduced. It seems likely that the new Government will drop Auckland’s regional fuel tax, although the timing of this remains unclear [25]. This move is likely to reduce the capacity of Auckland Council to fund public transport, given it might take some time to introduce alternatives (eg, electronic road user charging, or time-of-use charging). Funding for cycling infrastructure will also be reduced, based on the NZ First-National coalition agreement.

9. ***Delaying regulation on agricultural emissions.***
10. ***Policies increasing the intensity of agricultural production.***

Agriculture is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and water pollution in this country. The coalition agreements suggest the primary approach on agricultural greenhouse gas emissions from government will be a focus on “supporting new technology”. While some new technologies will no doubt be helpful, emphasis on technology as the primary solution has been found to encourage delaying other mitigation actions and adaptation [26]. Delaying the agricultural sector’s emissions reduction continues our contribution to going beyond global warming goals.

[National has said it will keep agriculture out of the Emissions Trading Scheme \(ETS\) and delay pricing on agricultural emissions until 2030.](#) The National-ACT agreement proposes a

2024 review of the methane science and targets for consistency with no additional warming from agricultural methane emissions. Meeting the current, more ambitious, methane targets could counteract some of the warming effects of CO₂ before we reach carbon net zero.

The intensity of agricultural production also has implications for water pollution. The intensification of land use over recent decades, particularly the rapid conversion of large areas of farmland to intensive dairy production, has put enormous pressure on waterways including the supply and quality of people's drinking water [27]. The National-NZ First agreement commits to "cut red tape and regulatory blocks on irrigation, water storage...". Irrigation and large-scale water storage drive increased intensity of agricultural systems and disrupt essential ecological processes [28, 29].

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