

## **Government Policy and Coastal Development: Looking Forward**

**Hon Chris Carter, Minister for the Environment**

**Speech to New Zealand Coastal Conference, 6 August 2004, Auckland**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I join you today with a sense of irony.

It is Conservation Week and you have gathered to discuss the current state of our coastal and lakeside environments, the pressures upon them and how to manage them.

Doubtless, many of you have grave concerns about the pace of some coastal development over recent years, the impact it has had on our landscapes and on the opportunities of the average New Zealand family to enjoy them.

Yet, absurdly, the political opposition in New Zealand, National and Act, are currently campaigning on disembowelling the Resource Management Act, the main legislative tool for landscape protection on the coast.

Apparently they believe not enough development has taken place lately, and too much is allegedly being constrained in the name of the environment.

Small wonder we have heard nothing from them in Conservation Week.

I raise this because I think it is important that the deliberations of this conference are placed in the current political context.

I also think it is important for some one to stand up and say that although economic development is crucial, it should not be achieved at the expense of our country's greatest asset, our natural environment, or at the expense of the traditional kiwi lifestyle.

Like the rest of my colleagues in the Labour-Progressive government, I think we have a responsibility to our kids to balance growth with its consequences, and balance the wealth of one generation with the rights of the next.

I think there is a real argument to had about whether a campground by the beach or a lake, used by thousands of kiwi families a year, is socially more important than yet another subdivision.

I think our iconic coastal sites should stay in NZ ownership, and as Conservation Minister I have fought to preserve as many of them for the public as possible, Kaikoura Island being but one example.

I think if the environmental protection the RMA offers is strangling our growth how is it our economy is booming? How is it unemployment is down by 40 per cent? Why is it you are gathered here today with the concerns some of you have about the pace of development?

I do think there is a case to be made for streamlining and improving the processes of the Resource Management Act, which is what my colleagues David Benson-Pope and Marian Hobbs are examining at present.

But I also think New Zealand must be very careful about watering down the precautionary approach taken towards to the environment, particularly on the coast.

With this in mind, I have some announcements to make.

As many of you will know, the Minister of Conservation and the Department of Conservation have a number of roles in coastal management under the RMA.

Most notably, DOC is charged with the development of a New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement, the only national planning document governing development on the coast.

All regional coastal plans, which specify the types of activities that will be allowed, controlled or prohibited in a particular coastal environment, must *give effect to* the contents of the National Coastal Policy Statement.

Today, I am releasing the findings of the first independent assessment of the effectiveness of this national statement in an effort to inform debate about sustainable use of the coast.

I ordered the assessment when I first became Minister because at that time the statement had been in place for eight years, a period in which a great deal of change had taken place legally and practically.

Dr Jo Rosier, a senior planning lecturer at Massey University, conducted the assessment and has considered how the statement is functioning against a range of important issues, including:

- The continued demand for coastal subdivision and various types of waterside development;
- The cumulative effects of structure and shorelines modifications on the natural character of the coast; and
- Concerns about public access to and along the coastal marine area.

There are copies of Dr Rosier's findings here today so you can examine them in detail but I'll give you a quick over view.

Generally speaking, she argues that the national statement has been constructive, but she places some important caveats on that judgement.

She believes the statement has been effectively implemented through regional policy statements and regional coastal plans but it has been only partially effective in influencing district plans, and only generally referred to in resource consent applications.

Dr Rosier recommends that I formally review the National Coastal Policy Statement with a view to altering parts of it.

She argues there is a need to revoke obsolete policies and provide additional guidance on the definition of the coastal environment and the interest of the Crown in the coastal marine area.

She recommends more work be done at a national level providing guidance for the identification of coastal landscapes and seascapes, and developing criteria for assessing appropriate subdivision, use and development.

She says there is a lack of rules to provide for protection of *environmental bottom lines* on land in the coastal environment.

These, I believe, are some of the key topics covered in this conference.

Regarding public access, Dr Rosier identifies that councils are often placed under considerable pressure to reduce or waive esplanade reserves in resource consents.

She has proposed that the statement provide guidance to councils about the locations in the coastal environment where the vesting of an esplanade reserve is important to provide long-term certainty of public access to and along the coastal marine area.

In short, she raises important issues.

I agree with Dr Rosier that a formal review of the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement is necessary but I have decided to wait until after the current RMA review before commencing one. The RMA review is looking at how to make the process for the development of national policy statements more efficient.

In the meantime, Dr Rosier's assessment is a reminder to us all that if we want better coastal management then we must get involved in the formation of regional policy statements, regional coastal plans and district plans.

At present, the RMA still provides some powerful tools for the public to achieve good outcomes on the coast, even if there are some on the political spectrum who want to tie the hands of the public in future.

If there is one thing I have noticed since becoming a Minister it is that local people tend to be the staunchest defenders of the environment in which they live.

We don't build apartment blocks that scar our own seaside views and we don't support motorways that slice through our gardens, just those of other people.

I have seen some fantastic examples of individuals making some impressively selfless decisions to protect coastal environments for their children around the country.

The Queen Elizabeth II Trust, for example, which covenants private land for conservation, has been focussing on coastal environments with some of the new funding the government has given it.

In the last three months alone the Trust has approved for protection 305 ha of coastal forest, much of it around the upper North Island.

At the same time, I am aware of a growing number of public-spirited New Zealanders, particularly here in Auckland, who are buying up large tracts of coastal land for private conservation projects rather than development.

To these individuals, many of whom want to remain anonymous, I say good on you, and if there is anything the Department of Conservation can do to help you in your work please don't hesitate to let me know.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Environmental Defence Society for organising this conference. The more discussion there is about sustainable development and coastal protection the better.

Our coastline is too important to the nation and the lifestyle of New Zealanders to leave vulnerable.

Thank you.

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