



Media Release

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Prepare for rising seas, warns Environment Commissioner

New Zealand needs to better prepare for the impacts of a rising sea on its coastal towns and cities, warns the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment.

In a major new report released today, Dr Jan Wright called for an overhaul of the way New Zealand is preparing for sea level rise.

“Homes, businesses and infrastructure worth billions of dollars have been built on low-lying land close to the coast,” Dr Wright said. “Rising sea levels will have major impacts in many places. In time, some coastal land will become uninhabitable.”

The Commissioner found that councils and communities face a very difficult task in planning for sea level rise. On the Kapiti Coast and in Christchurch City, for example, the process has been particularly adversarial.

“Perhaps the most difficult aspect is the impacts on people’s homes, which for many are much more than financial security. Councils must use science that is fit for purpose, and engage with communities in a measured way and with empathy.”

One key finding of the report is that preparing for sea level rise is very much a work in progress and that the Government needs to do more to help. There is a need to take some time to develop a better approach.

“We must plan for sea level rise, but there is time to do it carefully”, Dr Wright said. “There are a few cases where action is required soon, but in most cases it is more important to do it well than to rush.”

The report contains eight recommendations to the Government. The first seven are focused on improving the direction and advice given to councils. These are to the Minister for the Environment and the Minister of Conservation.

The last recommendation is to the Minister of Finance and is focused on the fiscal risks of sea level rise.

The report, *Preparing New Zealand for rising seas: Certainty and Uncertainty*, contains maps of Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin showing the elevation of low-lying coastal land above the spring high tide mark. More maps are available on www.pce.parliament.nz

“Low-lying coastal areas will in general be most vulnerable to sea level rise”, Dr Wright said. “But the actual impacts will vary based on local factors so the maps are simply land elevation maps, and not hazard maps.”

The report shows that there are at least 9000 New Zealand homes that lie less than 50 centimetres above spring high tides.

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