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Committee Policy, Finance and Strategy
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"Eco-sourcing" policy for native plants

1. Purpose

To recommend that Council adopt a policy for the eco-sourcing of all indigenous plant material used in planting programmes and sold through the Akura Conservation Centre.

2. Background

The Greater Wellington Regional Council is increasingly involved in restoration planting involving the use of native plants. These programmes often have as their objectives specified ecological goals such as habitat restoration or riparian zone enhancement. Currently, in excess of 115,000 native plants are planted annually by the Council and the figure is rising.

Planting programmes of the scale now being undertaken by the Council (or in association with other parties such as Care Groups) have the potential to negatively impact on indigenous biodiversity at a local and regional scale unless commonly accepted ecological best practices are adopted. These simple practices relating to the selection and sourcing of plant material are discussed in more detail below.

Managers responsible for the procurement and use of native plants across the Council are in agreement that the practices advocated in this report are a necessary step.

It should be noted that a number of council policy documents already address this issue. Examples include the Regional Parks Network Management Plan (2003) and the Hutt Floodplain Management Plan: Hutt River Environmental Strategy (2001).

It is also important to note that this report is concerned only with the *sourcing of indigenous plants*. It is not advocating the greater use of indigenous plants (although, as noted, the use is increasing as a result of various programmes) or, necessarily, a reduction in the use of exotic plants.

3. Why should we change?

There are a number of reasons why:

- i) The indigenous biodiversity of the Wellington region is central to the region's identity and is an irreplaceable part of its heritage;
- ii) Greater Wellington is taking a leading role in biodiversity management in the region. It is doing this through careful management of its own land and by working in partnership with other agencies, private landowners and the public to maximise the opportunities to protect, manage and enhance the region's biodiversity;
- iii) Greater Wellington wishes to demonstrate by its own actions in all its activities and operations that it advocates best indigenous planting practices;
- iv) Policy 10 of the Ecosystems chapter of the Regional Policy Statement encourages an approach to planting that protects genetic resources:

*To encourage the planting of native vegetation, **and particularly, regionally appropriate species.*** (Emphasis added)

The explanation of the policy states:

Policy 10 recognises the unique nature of New Zealand's native vegetation and, in particular, the vegetation of the Wellington Region. "Regionally appropriate species" are species indigenous to the Ecological District in which the planting is done. **Policy 10 has been adopted in order to conserve and enhance the valuable genetic resource that is contained in the Region's indigenous flora.** (Emphasis added).

- v) The Council advocates the use of eco-sourced plants in *The Native Plant Guide*, over 14,000 copies of which have been sold or distributed. This advocacy would be more effective if reinforced by our own actions.

4. What do we need to do?

There are two and simple related principles that are widely regarded as best practice in restoration planting:

- i) **Eco-source all plant material.**

Eco-sourcing describes the practice of sourcing native plants from wild grown local seed for local use. It is a means of maintaining local biodiversity, preserving a location's ecological history by recognising the variability of a species within an area or population and reflecting that

variability in any planting. (“Connecting the source with the destination”).

If we did not eco-source we would mix up the natural patterns of plant distribution. New Zealand’s plants have distinct distributions dictated by, amongst other factors, latitude, altitude, aspect, proximity to coast etc. Distinctive aces of the same species have developed in response to these factors. For example, manuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*) propagated from Northland, central North Island and Wairarapa Eastern Hills parent plants are visibly and (more importantly) genetically different from each other. To plant Northland manuka in eastern Wairarapa is to compromise the ecological history of the Wairarapa.

When sourcing native plants of unspecified origin from a commercial nursery it is not uncommon to be purchasing plants propagated from stock from the other end of the country.

It is recommended that, in line with Policy 10 of the Regional Policy Statement, the Council adopt a policy of eco-sourcing to the Ecological District level (There are five Ecological Districts in the Wellington Region)

It should be noted that a considerable proportion of current planting undertaken by Greater Wellington is already eco-sourced to the Ecological District level.

ii) Avoid planting indigenous weeds

The problem of indigenous plants with the potential to become weeds is, of course, completely avoided if an ecosourcing policy is followed.

The term weed in this context refers to a plant that has the potential to interfere with the natural process of creating and maintaining self-sustaining locally representative ecosystems. Some indigenous species can behave as weeds. These are plants that are not endemic (local) to the region and that have a demonstrated ability to displace locally occurring species. Karo, and pohutukawa are examples in this region. In both cases, there are local species that can be substituted. For example, southern rata can be used instead of pohutukawa.

5. How widely should these practices be applied?

It is often argued that because of the modified nature of much of our landscape the above practices need only be applied where planting is taking place in close proximity to “natural areas”. However, it is now common practice to adopt a “precautionary approach” in order to “do no further harm” and keep the options open for future restoration efforts and to use eco-sourced plants whenever native plantings are undertaken. This avoids the need for a delineation of the region into “natural” and “modified” zones, a process that is likely to be time-

consuming and inconclusive. It is recommended that Greater Wellington adopts the precautionary approach.

The Council's Akura Conservation Centre has been successful in promoting the use of native plants by landowners, particularly in the Wairarapa. It has established a reputation for selling plants of high quality backed by sound and pragmatic advice. At present these plants are not eco-sourced and species are sold that are not indigenous to the region. If the recommended practices above are adopted there would be implications for the plant procurement practices of the nursery to align itself with these practices. This however will provide an excellent opportunity for Greater Wellington. With a minor change in emphasis, Akura could become a flagship for the region by promoting the use of regionally-sourced native plants for restoration and enhancement purposes.

6. What is needed to make the change?

An exercise is currently underway to assess Greater Wellington's plant material requirements for the period 2004 – 2009. Once this is complete discussions can be held with the current and potential suppliers with the view to entering into contractual arrangements for the supply of eco-sourced plants. Initial pricing indicates that under a long-term contractual arrangement, prices for eco-sourced plants (including the on-site collection of seeds) are similar to those for conventional plants.

7. Implementation of the policy

Recognising that there will be variability in the speed with which Divisions within the Council will be able to implement this policy (as a result of existing contractual arrangements, for instance), it is recommended that timing of implementation be left to respective Divisional Managers. From time to time, there may be a need to make an exception to the policy (for emergency stabilisation planting following a flood event or the use of ornamental varieties of native plants for landscape work, for example). Again, it is suggested that this be left to the discretion of the relevant Divisional Manager.

8. Communications

As noted, the Greater Wellington has been actively promoting the use of eco-sourced plants to the public for some time. With the adoption of the policy recommended in this report, Council will bring its practices into line with its advocacy. This will provide the opportunity to further promote our significant ecosystem restoration work in the region

9. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Council:

1. **receive** the report;
2. **note** that eco-sourcing of native plants is a practice already adopted in many Greater Wellington planting programmes;
3. **adopt** as Council policy, the eco-sourcing to Ecological District level of all indigenous plant material used in planting projects wherever practicable or sold through Akura Conservation Centre;
4. **note** that Divisional Managers will have the responsibility to implement the policy as soon as practicable; and
5. **note** that any exemption to the policy will require the approval of a Divisional Manager.

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