greater WELLINGTON
REGIONAL COUNCIL

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Committee **Environment**
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Findings from the Ecosystems work for the State of the Environment report

1. Purpose

To inform the Committee of the main points emerging from the technical report on Ecosystems, written as part of the development of the State of the Environment Report.

2. Background

Over the last year, officers have been working on technical reports for the State of the Environment Report (SER), which will be published by the end of 2005. Technical reports have reported on the objectives of each of the chapters in the Regional Policy Statement (RPS).

This report covers the findings of works done for the ecosystem chapter of the SER. The research and analysis carried out for this chapter of the SER have been a mix of quantitative and qualitative data.

3. Ecosystems

The Ecosystems chapter of the RPS recognises the essential role that ecosystems play in sustaining the life-supporting processes of the natural environment upon which human life is dependent. The chapter also recognises that ecosystems are dynamic (constantly changing), that they are supported and maintained by complex processes rather than just being an assemblage of species, and that they do not exist in isolation from their wider environment.

The five objectives in the chapter are ambitious and challenging. They seek to:

- Increase the overall quality (or health) of the region's ecosystems.
- Ensure that all residents in the region have access to healthy ecosystems.
- Increase the total area of indigenous ecosystems.

- Protect the full range of our indigenous ecosystems.

- Protect the highest quality ecosystems.

One of the biggest problems we face in assessing the effectiveness of these objectives is the absence of relevant data, particularly region-wide data. As the RPS recognises, there are two broad measures we can use – ecosystem quantity and quality. The former is easier to assess, for example, satellite imagery allows us to monitor changes in indigenous scrub and forest cover in different parts of the region.

However, assessing the quality, or health, of our ecosystem at anything other than a site-specific scale is not possible. We know that there is a range of pressures that influence ecosystem health including the effects of plant and animal pests, surrounding land use and fragmentation. We have monitoring results from intensively managed (and monitored) areas such as our Key Native Ecosystems, that show by controlling or moderating these pressures, significant biodiversity gains can be achieved. It is not possible, outside these special areas, to get an accurate picture of ecosystem health.

Notwithstanding this basic issue of scarcity of data, some conclusions and observations can be drawn from the information we do have:

1. The need to protect and manage the threats to our unique biodiversity is becoming more widely understood.

2. Through out the region, the public is getting involved in the restoration of degraded ecosystems with a total of 33 groups under Greater Wellington's community environmental programme *Take Care.*

3. More and more landowners are entering into perpetual QEII National Trust covenants to legally protect biodiversity on their land. In the 5 years to 30 June 2005, a total of 1,132 hectares of lowland forest and wetlands were legally protected.

4. Only 9% of our remaining wetlands on private land are legally protected and many are still subject to grazing.

5. Many of our ecosystems are significantly diminished from their original state and will only survive into the future with our assistance.

6. Over the last five years in the western part of the region, particularly on the outskirts of the major urban areas, there has been a slight increase in indigenous forest. In contrast, in Eastern Wairarapa there continues to be a loss of indigenous forest as a result of conversion to farmland.

7. The Bovine Tb programme is having a beneficial effect on biodiversity by reducing possum populations to a level where their ecological impacts are minimised.

8. While freshwater fish are not regularly monitored in the region, surveys over the last four years have generally revealed the presence of the same species as were recorded in the 80 years up to 2001.

4. Communication

A communication plan has been developed for the State of the Environment Report, which will be published in December of this year.

5. Recommendations

That the Committee:

1. ***Receives*** *the report.*

2. ***Notes*** *the content of the report.*

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