

## The Conservation Amendment Bill 2026: Four Changes the Rural Sector Needs to Understand

### The Conservation Amendment Bill 2026 is currently before Parliament and represents the most significant reform of New Zealand's conservation legislation since the Conservation Act 1987 was enacted nearly 40 years ago.

The Bill seeks to modernise the management of public conservation land, reform concession processes and introduce a new planning framework.

Much of the public discussion surrounding the Bill has focused on conservation outcomes, public access and environmental protection. However, for many in the rural sector, the more immediate question is what the reforms could mean for farming businesses, irrigation schemes, rural infrastructure providers and landowners who regularly interact with conservation land.

While the Bill remains subject to the Parliamentary process and may yet change, here are five aspects of the reforms that are particularly relevant to the agricultural sector.

It is worth noting that, earlier versions of the Bill proposed broader powers to facilitate exchanges and, in some circumstances, disposal of conservation land. Following public feedback, the Government has announced that those provisions will be removed from the Bill.

The submission deadline on the bill has also been extended until midday, Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2026.

### 1. Concessions, Easements and Access Rights

#### What is changing?

The Bill proposes a substantial overhaul of the concession's regime. This is the framework used by DOC to authorise activities on conservation land, including easements, licences, leases and permits. The Government's objective is to create a more standardised and nationally consistent system.

#### Why does it matter?

Some farming businesses rely on rights over conservation land for access, infrastructure and operational purposes -a farm track, irrigation pipeline, grazing concession, telecommunications facility or electricity line are some examples.

In some parts of the country, particularly in high-country and hill-country farming areas, grazing activities, stock movement and farm access can depend on concessions involving marginal strips, river corridors, valley systems and other areas of conservation land.

A more standardised concessions framework may provide greater certainty and efficiency around how these arrangements are managed, renewed and administered. However, the practical implications will depend on the final form of the legislation, the content of the National Conservation Policy Statement and Area Plans, and how grazing and access-related activities are ultimately classified within the new framework.

#### Key takeaway

For many farmers and rural businesses, concession reform could prove to be the most important aspect of the Bill. Greater certainty and efficiency around access and infrastructure approvals would be relevant to many rural businesses.

### 2. Faster and More Standardised Concession Processes

#### What is changing?

Alongside broader concessions reform, the Bill proposes a more nationally directed and standardised

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## **The Conservation Amendment Bill 2026: The Five Changes Farmers Need to Understand** (Continued)

approach to how concession applications are categorised, processed and managed.

A key feature of the proposed framework is the creation of activities that may be classified as either "exempt" or "pre-approved" under the future National Conservation Policy Statement (NCPS). Exempt activities would not require concessions, while pre-approved activities will be able to access a simplified approval pathway. The Bill also includes provisions aimed at improving allocation processes and introducing more consistent concessions management across the country.

### **Why does it matter?**

One of the frustrations often expressed by concession applicants is that similar activities can be treated differently depending on where they are located and which planning documents apply.

For farmers, irrigation schemes and infrastructure providers, uncertainty can be as problematic as regulation itself. Delays in obtaining approvals can increase project costs, affect financing arrangements and complicate long-term planning.

The Government's intention appears to be to create a framework that provides greater consistency and clarity regarding what activities can occur on conservation land and how they will be assessed.

For an irrigation scheme seeking approval for infrastructure crossing conservation land, the reforms may provide a clearer indication of whether the activity is likely to require a full concessions process.

A farmer requiring ongoing access rights may benefit from greater consistency in how applications are considered across different parts of the country.

Importantly, much of the detail has yet to be developed. Whether an activity becomes exempt, pre-approved or requires a full concession process will depend on future policy documents, including the NCPS and Area Plans.

As a result, the practical effect of these reforms remains uncertain at this stage.

### **Key takeaway**

The proposed reforms are aimed at creating a more predictable, efficient and consistent concessions system. For farming businesses, irrigation schemes and infrastructure providers, the most significant benefit may ultimately be greater certainty around how activities on conservation land are managed and approved, although the practical implications will depend heavily on the next stage of policy development

## **3. A Shift Towards Enabling Development on Conservation Land**

### **What is changing?**

One of the Bill's most significant policy changes is the introduction of a new statutory function that explicitly recognises the benefits of economic opportunities arising from the use and development of public conservation land. The Bill seeks to enable this use and development to the greatest extent practicable while continuing to protect conservation values.

### **Why does it matter?**

Under the current framework, decisions are focused on conservation outcomes. The proposed reforms signal a greater willingness to recognise that conservation land can support economic activity where that activity is consistent with conservation objectives.

For rural businesses, this may influence how future infrastructure and use proposals are assessed.

Projects such as:

- irrigation schemes;
- stock water infrastructure;
- renewable energy developments;
- access roads;
- telecommunications facilities; and
- rural utility infrastructure

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## The Conservation Amendment Bill 2026: The Five Changes Farmers Need to Understand (Continued)

may be assessed within a framework that more explicitly recognises economic considerations alongside conservation outcomes.

That does not mean such projects will automatically be approved. Conservation values will remain important, and many activities will continue to require detailed assessment.

### 4. National Conservation Policy Statement and Area Plans

#### What is changing?

The Bill proposes replacing the current collection of conservation strategies and plans with a National Conservation Policy Statement (NCPS) and a suite of Area Plans. The Government's intention here is to simplify the current planning framework and provide more consistent national direction.

#### Why does it matter?

Infrastructure providers, irrigation schemes, forestry operators and agribusiness investors often make decisions years in advance. Understanding what activities may be appropriate in particular locations can significantly influence investment decisions.

As seems to be the case for many of the proposed changes, much of the detail remains to be developed. The content of the NCPS and Area Plans will ultimately be important in determining how the new framework operates in practice.

#### Key Takeaways

The Conservation Amendment Bill has the potential to reshape the way many rural businesses interact with public conservation land. While the final outcomes remain uncertain, the reforms are significant enough that farmers, irrigation schemes, infrastructure providers and rural land users should remain engaged as the legislation continues through the Parliamentary process.

While the proposed concession reform is likely to be the most significant change for many farmers and rural businesses, particularly where access or infrastructure crosses conservation land, infrastructure providers and irrigation schemes should also monitor developments closely, as several reforms could influence future project planning and approvals.

The National Conservation Policy Statement and Area Plans will also be important, with many practical outcomes ultimately influenced by those future planning documents.

#### Want to know more?

If you have any questions about the Conservation Amendment Bill or are interested in lodging a submission please contact our specialist [Environment and Planning Team](#).

The submission deadline on the bill is currently open until midday, Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2026.