

The draft National Conservation Policy Statement: streamlining the conservation planning system

On 18 May 2026, the Department of Conservation (DOC) released a draft National Conservation Policy Statement (view the document [here](#)) which is open for consultation until 9 July 2026.

The new framework at a glance

The NCPS will sit in a new proposed hierarchy of conservation management tools as follows:

- Conservation Act, National Parks Act, Reserves Act etc.
- NCPS
- Area Plans

According to the Government, this structure will streamline the country's concession framework (as explained in our overview article [here](#)).

It is intended the proposed framework will be a less complex process and will provide applicants with greater transparency and certainty about where activities are suitable on different types of public conservation land.

If you're thinking that consultation on the NCPS sounds familiar, you'd be right. DOC carried out a targeted consultation on the draft NCPS in July and August last year. However, at that point in time the changes proposed under the Conservation Amendment Bill (Bill) had not yet been released.

The Bill at clause 13D(2)(b) sets the purpose of a NCPS as being to:

recognise the economic opportunities that arise from the use and development of land and other natural resources and historic resources managed by the Department, and to enable this use and development to the greatest extent practicable under those Acts.

Although the consultation document does not explicitly state a purpose, it does look to be attempting to fulfil this cl 13D requirement.

The explicit statutory purpose to recognise economic opportunities from public conservation land, is not something we have seen in our national conservation framework before.

Changes from the current system

The NCPS is intended to have the same function as existing General Policies – to provide direction required for the implementation of conservation legislation. Area Plans are intended to replace Conservation Management Strategies, Conservation Management Plans and National Park Management Plans.

General Policies are currently approved by the Minister, and the consultation document indicates that the Minister will also be responsible for approving the NCPS.

Visitor Zones

The NCPS will specify “visitor zones”, with each zone describing the type of recreation and tourism that is appropriate for an area. These are set out in the consultation document as follows:

- Visitor amenity areas – being more enabling of intensive tourism and recreation development.
- High visitor zones – providing easy access where most recreation and tourism occur.
- Medium visitor zones – large-scale natural settings where recreation activities are encouraged but infrastructure is limited to essential facilities.
- Low visitor zones – large-scale remote natural settings with limited low-impact infrastructure.
- Wilderness areas – legislative restrictions on certain activities.

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Area Plans will be required to designate all land within their boundaries as one of the above zones.

The NCPS will also include guidance and require an assessment as to which economic activities are likely to be consistent with the proposed visitor zones **and** the purpose (being the statutory land classification) for which the land is held.

Directing the content of Area Plans

Area Plans are intended to be much shorter and more streamlined than the Management Strategies and Plans that they will be replacing. They will also aim to remove the overlapping and sometimes inconsistent frameworks that currently exist. Concession applications will need to be consistent with Area Plans for approval.

The NCPS will specify what types of policies can and cannot be included in an Area Plan. Content not provided for in the NCPS will not be able to be included in an Area Plan, with the exceptions to this being in visitor amenity areas and to uphold Treaty settlement redress. Area Plans will be required to list Te Tiriti o Waitangi settlements which fall within the relevant plan's boundaries and the draft acknowledges additional content may be required to uphold Treaty settlement redress.

The reason for allowing area-specific policies in visitor amenity areas is based on the relatively higher density of development these areas are likely to undergo compared with other classifications of conservation areas. This way the policies can be based on the likely use or needs of that particular area.

The NCPS will direct that Area Plans cannot include limits or conditions on concessionaires. This is because alternative tools such as booking systems and access charges are intended to be used instead to manage limits. The removal of limits from the statutory management documents is a big change from the status quo.

Exempt and Pre-approved Activities

DOC anticipates as much as 40% of concession activities to fall under these new categories of exempt and pre-approved activities. Their aim is that in having less applications to process, there will be more resources to be directed towards larger, more complex concessions.

The following four activities would be exempt from requiring a concession application, although conditions will still apply:

- News of the day filming or photography
- Collection of air for research purposes
- Collection of water for research purposes
- Observational research

It is unclear at this stage whether these exempt activities will still require some form of registration.

Appendix 2 of the consultation document sets the criteria and conditions for these activities. This includes a set of conditions that applies to all exempt activities followed by a range of different exempt activities including the collection of air and water for research purposes to ensure that conservation continues to be a priority.

There will be 16 activities under the NCPS that qualify as pre-approved concessions and a set of standard terms and conditions to manage potential adverse effects, with DOC retaining the ability to set specific contractual conditions.

Appendix 3 of the consultation document sets out the activity descriptions, terms and conditions of pre-approved activities which ranges from various guided recreation activities, research and specific types of filming:

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- Guided walking (day walk or overnight/multiday).
- Guided biking/mountain bike trips.
- Guided horse-trekking.
- Guided rock-climbing trips.
- Non-powered, water-based guiding (e.g. kayaking, canoeing, white-water rafting).
- Four-wheel driving and quad-biking.
- Commercial boat transport using powered watercraft (e.g. water taxis, charter boat trips, scheduled boat trips).
- Commercial transport to and from public conservation land.
- One-off drone use on PCL where the activity is not prohibited by bylaws or regulations.
- Limited collection of rocks.
- Limited collection of soil.
- Limited collection of non-protected wildlife.
- Collection of non-threatened flora.
- Small scale commercial events on formed tracks or in established visitor areas.
- Small to medium scale commercial filming or photography on formed tracks or in established visitor areas.

Appendix 3 also identifies which pre-approved activities can be undertaken in which category of public conservation land (i.e. national park, recreation reserve, marginal strip etc) these are:

Standardised Pre-assessments

For some activities that are not exempt or pre-approved, a standardised pre-assessment application process will apply. Standardising a range of pre-

assessments is intended to result in greater consistency as to how concession applications are evaluated and give applicants a better understanding as to where different activities are anticipated to occur.

The consultation document lists and defines the range of activities with standardised pre-assessment (set out in appendix 4) being:

- Recreation and tourism infrastructure and facilities;
- Grazing, beehives and planting; and
- Utilities, roading and public infrastructure.

These activities have also been assessed against different land classifications and visitor zones (see Tables 6 and 7, Appendix 4). This assessment illustrates where the Department considers activities to be appropriate or inappropriate, although some will still require case-by-case evaluation. For example, sealed tracks:

- Are appropriate in national parks, conservation parks, stewardship areas, recreation reserves, marginal strips and amenity areas;
- Are inappropriate in wildlife management areas and sanctuary areas; and
- Will be assessed on a case-by-case basis in scenic reserves, ecological areas, nature and scientific reserves and historic reserves.

What happens next?

Although the draft NCPS consultation is a separate process to the Bill, they are intended to progress in tandem as the Bill moves through the parliamentary process of select committee, submissions and hearings. This does mean that the scope of this draft NCPS will be subject to change based on amendments to the Bill.

Submissions on the Bill are due by 2 July and submissions on the NCPS consultation are due by 9 July. View the consultation document [here](#).

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If you have any questions about the NCPS consultation process or would like assistance in preparing a submission, please contact our **Queenstown Environment and planning team**: [Maree Baker-Galloway](#), [Hannah Zydenbos](#), and [Conor Meredith](#) .