

Natural Environment Bill and Planning Bill

Central government | February 2026

What are the Natural Environment Bill and the Planning Bill?

The Government introduced the Natural Environment Bill and the Planning Bill to Parliament in December 2025 to replace the RMA with a new resource management system. HortNZ submitted on these bills on 13 February 2026 and will appear before the Select Committee to explain our submission points to the politicians responsible for reviewing the bills. The Government intends to pass both bills into law before this year's election.

What Growers Need to Know

The Government's intention is that the new planning system will be easier and less expensive for growers and farmers with fewer consents and better conditions for development. However, HortNZ is concerned that the drafting of the bills does not match the Government's intent. HortNZ has been working closely with the rest of the primary sector to make sure the Government knows that significant changes are needed to make the new system deliver on their promises.

Key Concerns - Natural Environment Bill

Tax on Water

HortNZ does not support that the Bill's draft opens the door for market-based allocation or a levy on natural resources, and we've asked the Government to take these options out of the bill. Market-based allocation would create a system where auctions or tenders would mean that water or the ability to discharge nutrients would go to the highest bidder, and a levy would be an effective tax on water or the ability to discharge.

Permitted Activities in Overallocated Catchments

The way the bill is drafted states that there can be no new permitted activities in overallocated catchments. This would be a worse outcome than the RMA for many growers, since fruit growing is currently permitted throughout the country, and vegetable growing is permitted in many places. Many catchments with horticulture are considered overallocated because growing often takes place near urban areas and other farming activities which collectively put pressure on catchments.

HortNZ has asked for a change to this drafting, especially to recognise that the Government only just made amendments to the RMA in 2025 to ensure activities can continue to be permitted or get consents in overallocated catchments where there are standards that make sure those activities will reduce their environmental impacts over reasonable timeframes. We think that is a much more sensible approach to allow food production to continue while still making environmental improvements.

The Cost and Compliance of Permitted Activities

Even though the Government has said that the new system should be cheaper with more permitted activities and fewer consents, HortNZ's read is that the Natural Environment Bill opens the door for many more requirements and high compliance costs for permitted activities. This could include registering all permitted parts of an operation with the council, getting written approval from all affected people, and/or requiring a Certificate of Compliance from a qualified person for all permitted parts of a business, to name a few. We've asked that these requirements be stripped back and reasonable, especially when activities already have freshwater farm plans.

In HortNZ's view, if a grower has a freshwater farm plan, especially through an audited and certified industry assurance programme like NZGAP, they should automatically meet the permitted activity requirements on the regional council/Natural Environment side of things. The district council/Planning Bill side of things is different because a freshwater farm plan doesn't cover noise standards, the height of your structures, etc.

We've been very clear that freshwater farm plan requirements shouldn't be duplicated elsewhere in the consenting process, because that would just double up costs and information requirements for growers without any additional benefit.

Pathway for National Direction

Some vegetable growers are still facing unworkable regional plans that could leave them unable to get a consent in the Waikato or Horizons regions. HortNZ is still advocating for National Direction for Commercial Vegetable Production to resolve this issue and prevent it from happening in other parts of the country. In order for the Government to make that national direction under the new system, the Natural Environment Bill needs a clear goal that links to that national direction.

HortNZ has suggested two options in our submission:

1. A goal to enable the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables, and
2. A goal to enable activities of national importance.

Either goal would allow HortNZ to advocate for better policy outcomes for both fruit and vegetable growers down the track, and both together would be very powerful. For example, we could then advocate for collective water storage to be listed as an activity of national importance in national direction, so the Government could provide clear direction to regional councils about how to enable it.

Key Concerns - Planning Bill

Reverse Sensitivity

The Expert Advisory Group which was responsible for setting the direction of travel for the bills signalled that reverse sensitivity would be a key component of the new system - meaning people who moved to the nuisance wouldn't be able to complain about it.¹

¹ New Zealand Government. (2025). [Blueprint for resource management reform](#). (p. 8)

However, this concept seems to have been completely missed in the Planning Bill, so HortNZ has asked for a goal at the top of the bill that better recognises reverse sensitivity.

Well-Functioning Rural Environments

One of the goals of the Planning Bill is for well-functioning urban and rural environments, but the Bill has far more of a focus on urban than rural planning. HortNZ has asked for an explicit goal that primary production should be enabled in rural environments and that the effects of housing on horticulture where urban and rural areas neighbour each other need to be better managed. We also argued that rural infrastructure like water storage needs to be better prioritised in the bill.

Key Concerns - Both Bills

How Spatial Planning, Limit Setting and Allocation Work Together

The way the bills are designed, spatial planning happens before environmental limit setting or resource allocation. In HortNZ's view, it doesn't make sense to zone land as highly productive or set aside land for food production without also enabling horticulture with water allocation and the ability to discharge. We've asked for limits to be set before or alongside spatial planning and for allocation decisions to consider enabling the use of highly productive land for primary production.

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Ministry for the Environment website](#)
- Keep an eye on [HortNZ's website](#)
- HortNZ contact: Emily Levenson, emily.levenson@hortnz.co.nz, 027 305 4423