



TEU

TERTIARY EDUCATION UNION
TE HAUTŪ KAHURANGI

Submission of
Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education Union
to the
Environment Committee
on the
Conservation Amendment Bill
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education Union (TEU) is the largest union and professional association representing 12,000 academic and general/allied staff in the tertiary education sector (in polytechnics, universities, wānanga, private training establishments, and rural education activities programmes).

1.2. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Conservation Amendment Bill.

2. TEU POSITION AND RECOMMENDATION

2.1. For the reasons outlined in our submission, we strongly oppose the Conservation Amendment Bill and recommend that it is withdrawn.

2.2. TEU represents educators and researchers across Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary sector, many of whom teach and conduct research in fields directly connected to conservation, ecology, and environmental science. Through this work, our members see firsthand the value of a well-protected natural environment, and we are committed to ensuring it is safeguarded for the benefit of future generations of students, researchers, and communities.

2.3. The Conservation Amendment Bill is not simply a package of administrative reforms. It represents a significant shift in the statutory purpose, governance and management philosophy of Aotearoa New Zealand's conservation system.

2.4. This Bill breaks the longstanding cross-party consensus on intergenerational stewardship of conservation land. Changes of this magnitude require a much stronger evidential basis and broader public mandate than has been demonstrated to date. They also require in-depth consultation with Iwi, as per obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

3. **Reject Clause 5 (new section 4A): It narrows the practical effect of section 4 of the Conservation Act.**

3.1. Section 4 of the Conservation Act has, for nearly 40 years, required the Act to be interpreted and administered so as to give effect to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Clause 5 inserts a new section 4A specifying how those obligations apply in relation to land management processes. The proposed new section 4A confines Treaty obligations to specified procedural requirements and particular decision-making contexts.

3.2. This represents a significant change to the existing statutory framework and risks reducing the flexibility of decision-makers and the courts to give substantive effect to Treaty principles as circumstances require. Given the central importance of Te Tiriti in providing commitments to Māori regarding their right to ongoing self-determination over whenua, and within Aotearoa New Zealand's constitutional and conservation law, Parliament should not proceed without compelling evidence that these changes will strengthen rather than weaken Māori-Crown relationships and conservation outcomes.

4. Reject Clause 6: It fundamentally changes the statutory purpose of the Department of Conservation.

4.1. Clause 6 amends section 6 of the Conservation Act by adding a new departmental function requiring the Department of Conservation to recognise and enable economic opportunities "to the greatest extent practicable."

4.2. This is not a minor administrative amendment but a fundamental change to the statutory functions of DOC. The proposed amendment would require DOC to actively facilitate economic activity alongside its conservation responsibilities, creating an inherent conflict between conservation objectives and commercial interests.

4.3. Once enacted, this new function is likely to influence every future concession decision, management plan and policy statement prepared under the Act. Before making such a profound shift in statutory purpose, Parliament should require compelling evidence that the benefits outweigh the risks to biodiversity, ecosystem integrity and the public interest.

5. Reject Clauses 11–23: They replace the existing conservation planning framework with a more centralised system.

5.1. The Bill repeals much of the existing statutory framework governing conservation strategies, general policies and management plans and replaces it with a new National Conservation Policy Statement (NCPS) framework. Clause 15 inserts new sections 13A–13I establishing the NCPS, while related clauses repeal much of the existing planning architecture.

5.2. Although improving consistency and reducing duplication are legitimate policy objectives, the proposed reforms substantially increase ministerial influence over conservation policy while reducing the role of locally developed conservation management strategies and plans. The Bill therefore shifts decision-making away from place-based planning and towards a more centralised national framework.

Parliament should require stronger evidence that this restructuring will improve conservation outcomes rather than simply accelerate development approvals and administrative efficiency.

6. Reject Clause 25 and associated amendments: They weaken protections against the disposal of conservation land.

6.1. Clause 25 repeals section 26 of the Conservation Act, which currently governs the disposal of stewardship areas, while related amendments across the Bill introduce a more permissive framework for exchanging and disposing of conservation land.

6.2. The Government describes these changes as providing greater flexibility in land management. However, conservation land is held in trust for present and future generations because of its ecological, landscape, cultural and recreational values. Reducing statutory constraints on disposal increases the likelihood of incremental loss and fragmentation of the conservation estate. Once land leaves public conservation ownership or protection, those decisions are often effectively irreversible. Parliament should therefore retain a precautionary approach and preserve the existing statutory safeguards unless there is compelling evidence that weaker protections will improve long-term conservation outcomes.

7. Reject Clauses 7, 9 and related governance amendments: They reduce independent oversight of conservation decision-making.

7.1. Clauses 7 and 9 amend the statutory functions of the New Zealand Conservation Authority and Conservation Boards, while other provisions reduce their role within the new planning framework.

7.2. These bodies were deliberately established by Parliament to provide independent expertise, public accountability and long-term stewardship across changing governments.

7.3. Weakening their influence risks concentrating greater decision-making authority within Ministers and the Department itself while reducing opportunities for independent advice, local knowledge and public participation. Good conservation governance depends not only on efficient decision-making but also on transparency, independent scrutiny and public confidence. Parliament should therefore retain strong statutory roles for these independent bodies.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1. The Conservation Amendment Bill represents a fundamental shift away from the principles that have guided Aotearoa New Zealand's conservation system for decades, weakening Treaty obligations, redirecting DOC's purpose toward economic development, centralising decision-making, reducing protections for conservation land, and diminishing independent oversight.
- 8.2. TEU members value a well-protected natural environment and believe changes of this magnitude require stronger evidential basis, broader public mandate, and proper consultation with Iwi than has been demonstrated.
- 8.3. We strongly oppose the Bill and recommend that it is withdrawn.

9. ABOUT TEU

9.1. The TEU actively acknowledges Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the foundation for the relationship between Māori and the Crown. We recognise the significance of specific reference to Te Tiriti in the Education Act and the emergent discourse resulting from this. We also accept the responsibilities and actions that result from our nation's signing of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

9.2. The TEU expresses its commitment to Te Tiriti by working to apply the four whāinga (values) from our *Te Koeke Tiriti* framework as a means to advance our TEU Te Tiriti relationship in all our work and decision-making – with members and when engaging on broader issues within the tertiary sector and beyond – such as our response to the Conservation Amendment Bill:

Tū kotahi, tū kaha – We are strong and unified; we are committed to actions which will leave no-one behind; we create spaces where all people can fully participate, are fairly represented, and that foster good relationships between people.

Ngā piki, ngā heke – We endure through good times and bad; we work to minimise our impact on the environment; we foster ahikā – the interrelationship of people and the land, including supporting tūrangawaewae – a place where each has the right to stand and belong.

Awhi atu, awhi mai – We take actions that seek to improve the lives of the most vulnerable; we give and receive, acknowledging that reciprocity is fundamental to strong and equitable relationships; and we work to advance approaches that ensure quality public tertiary education for all.

Tātou, tātou e – We reach our goals through our collective strength and shared sense of purpose, which are supported through participatory democratic decision-making processes and structures.

9.3. Our response to the Conservation Amendment Bill stems from our commitment to the whāinga expressed above and our wish to see these enacted in the tertiary education sector and in our society and communities.