



David MacLeod (Chairman) and Basil Chamberlain (Chief Executive), Taranaki Regional Council.

## Message from the Chairman and Chief Executive

We have great pleasure in presenting *Taranaki as One—Taranaki Tāngata Tū Tahi*, the region's fourth state of the environment report.

The report's title embodies an important theme: A united effort involving hard work and serious investment right across the regional spectrum is a key reason that Taranaki enjoys a generally good and improving environment. Taranaki can be proud of itself.

Challenges remain, of course. But based on the findings in this report, including its countless examples of Taranaki's 'get on and do it' attitude, we can be confident about the future.

This is a comprehensive report, backed up by robust science that has been independently peer-reviewed. It sets out current environmental conditions and trends since our state of the environment monitoring programmes began almost two decades ago.

And how times have changed. Back in the 1970s, for example, most dairy farm waste and a lot of poorly treated town and factory waste was discharged directly into the nearest watercourse. Untreated waste generated by tens of thousands of cows was washed into the region's rivers and streams every day.

Today, every dairy farm in Taranaki operates under a regularly monitored discharge permit that requires effluent to be treated before discharge. And the rates of compliance are consistently high at over 93%.

Clean, healthy water is the region's most precious resource. A highlight of the report is the finding that trends in ecological health and a wide range of physical and chemical measures of water quality are the best that have ever been recorded. For example, in ecological health monitoring in the past 18 years, 44 sites have shown improving trends, with no significant deterioration at any site. Improving trends at 14 sites have become highly significant since 2007.

The overall physical and chemical quality of fresh water is also good. There has been improvement or no significant change in nitrogen levels in the past 19 years. Overall trends of improvement are more apparent in recent years. The majority of sites meet NIWA guidelines for most water uses, most of the time.

It's important to note that pressures on our freshwater resource are stable compared with many other areas, particularly those experiencing widespread dairy conversions or rapid urbanisation. Dairy cow numbers and fertiliser use, for example, have changed little in Taranaki over the past decade.

However, we should not and cannot rest on our laurels. The community has high and growing expectations and aspirations around the quality of our waterways. Protecting and further enhancing our freshwater resource will effectively 'future-proof' the region, ensuring that Taranaki can continue to offer economic opportunities and enviable lifestyles to the children and grandchildren of today's citizens.

As part of a review of both the *Fresh Water Plan* and *Soil Plan*, the Council is proposing that farm dairy effluent should be discharged to land rather than to waterways wherever possible. We are also proposing to lock in completion of the region's world-scale riparian management programme by requiring the fencing and planting of ring plain and coastal terrace waterways to be finished by mid-2020. We are confident that these two steps would result in a significant step-up in water quality, at an acceptable cost to farmers.

Thousands of kilometres of streambanks have already been fenced and millions of native plants have already gone into the ground under the riparian management programme. It's a shining example of the region's 'get on and do it' attitude, under which the Taranaki landscape is literally being transformed. Many farmers are telling us that riparian planting has added precious biodiversity habitat and important amenity values, in addition to water quality benefits. It is the largest environmental enhancement planting scheme on privately-owned land in New Zealand.

Over 99.5% of Taranaki's 1,800 dairy farms now have riparian management plans in place covering 14,000 kilometres of streambank.

Our previous *State of the Environment Report* in 2009 noted that taking into account the pre-existing fencing and planting, 60% of streambanks were fenced and 43% planted. Now in 2015, 80% or 11,093 kilometres of streambank covered by riparian plans are fenced and 65% or 6,874 kilometres of streambanks recommended for planting are now protected by existing or new plantings. More than 3.6 million plants have been supplied to landowners since the programme began. This is remarkable progress indeed.

For yet another example of 'get on and do it', look at the progress that's been made in biodiversity protection and enhancement over the past few years. Biodiversity, the variety of all biological life and the ecosystems to which they belong, is an emerging issue and one that will become even more important in future. Much good work is being undertaken by many people from all corners of the region to combat the pressures on our biodiversity from land development and invasive pests.

The Council has led the charge with a \$1.2 million biodiversity spend in 2013/2014—including working with others through biodiversity enhancement grants.

Our Key Native Ecosystem (KNE) database, which is regularly updated as new information comes to hand, has been crucial in allowing the Council to strategically target its limited resources to where they are most needed and in working with private landowners to prepare and implement Biodiversity Plans for the most significant sites. Monitoring bears out the effectiveness of this approach. For example, 70% of wetlands covered by Council Biodiversity Plans have shown overall improvement in the past five years, compared with 30% of those not covered by plans.

The Council has also worked hard in bringing together the diverse range of government agencies, community trusts and other interest groups in the region to agree on overall priorities for biodiversity protection and enhancement in the region. The Council has facilitated the Taranaki Biodiversity Trust and the Taranaki Biodiversity Forum Accord with this in mind.

The information in this report also reveals that in general, the region's land, air and coast are in very good or excellent shape, continuing or maintaining trends set out in earlier reports. So is Taranaki's wide range of heritage and amenity values, where the community maintains a progressive outlook. The region's approach to solid waste management has largely succeeded in addressing the environmental effects of disposal and is increasingly focused on waste minimisation—by recovering, reusing and recycling. The region is also generally well prepared to deal with natural hazards.

All of these trends are set to continue, and in many cases ramp up in future.

The information contained in this report draws on comprehensive state of the environment monitoring programmes put in place by the Council mainly in the mid-1990s. We acknowledge our highly qualified and committed team of environmental scientists and other specialists in-house, who have spent many long hours developing robust programmes with scientific integrity.

The report also draws on information compiled and supplied by the New Plymouth, Stratford and South Taranaki district councils, the Department of Conservation and many other agencies and community groups. This takes us back to the key theme reflected in the report's title, *Taranaki as One—Taranaki Tāngata Tū Tahī*: A whole range of agencies, iwi, and individuals are involved in managing the environment.

We have been struck by the extent to which the community has been willing to support and to lead environmental programmes. Three trends have become particularly apparent over the last few years: the first is that there has been more hard investment in the environment across the board, secondly, interventions designed to change behaviours have increased, and thirdly, community engagement amongst the population in general is up.

In respect of investment made in the environment, Business and Economic Research Limited (BERL) conservatively estimates that the region's annual capital and operating investment in environmental protection and improvement has increased from \$85 million annually in the 2002–2007 period to \$117 million a year between 2008 and 2014.

In relation to interventions, there has been more activity in this area—of both a regulatory and non-regulatory nature. There have been more national policy directions and standards, and more regional and district rules that are better targeted. There has also been greater use made of non-regulatory approaches including financial assistance and information and advisory services, especially where the intention is to support the community to take positive action to achieve outcomes.

Finally, there has been a trend towards the community increasingly leading by example. There are more people voluntarily doing more. This is very clearly the case for example, in protecting biodiversity on private land, and is markedly different from the situation even 10 or 12 years ago.

Looking to the future we can only see a further strengthening of these trends.

The Council is greatly heartened by the extent to which the Taranaki community has moved to embrace environmental stewardship and the concept of sustainability. This bodes well for meeting future issues that will almost certainly challenge us.

The Council believes that the sustainable use, development and protection of Taranaki's natural and physical resources ensures that we look after people and the environment in the long term. It is also consistent with the Council's Mission Statement to work for a thriving and prosperous Taranaki. This will involve continuing to work alongside other resource management and environment agencies, farmers, landowners, industries and businesses to bring about practical, positive and permanent results over the next five years and in the decades beyond.



David MacLeod, Chairman



Basil Chamberlain, Chief Executive