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Report to the Rural Services and Wairarapa Committee
from Ray Clarey, Senior Biosecurity Officer, Animals

Key Native Ecosystem Management: Update Report

1. Purpose

To update the Committee on Key Native Ecosystem activities over the past year. The last update provided to the Committee was in March 1999.

2. Background

Key Native Ecosystems (KNE's) are areas of prime native habitat of regional significance. They are primarily native forest remnants but also include wetlands and dune-lands with significant native flora and fauna values. The Council continues to consult with a wide range of interest groups in an endeavour to identify and record all potential sites in the Wellington Region.

The Department of Conservation (DoC) has been an integral part of this process and their 'Ecol' database together with their Wairarapa Plains Natural Areas Survey has provided a comprehensive ecological information base. However, areas administered by DoC are excluded from the KNE programme as they are managed separately under a 'Conservation Management Strategy'.

3. KNE Database

A database has been developed incorporating all known sites. This database is currently undergoing a major upgrading programme so that it can provide a broader and more complex range of information. This significant task includes the linking of identification details (DoC ID No., site name, ecological region, map references, area size, altitude etc), survey information (date, protection status, regional ranking, lists of flora, fauna & endangered species), detailed description of the areas, and site work history. Photos, possum control reports, maps and monitoring results will also be able to be linked.

Whilst the database contains a lot of information it needs programming to make it more 'user friendly' for interrogation by staff.

4. Prioritising for Pest Animal Control

To date the Biosecurity Department has primarily focussed on assessing each site for ecological values, then allocating a regional priority rating and carrying out possum control within the prioritised areas. Whilst the control of goats and mustelids are also a consideration, the scope for KNE enhancement is limited by the objectives of the Regional Animal Pest Management Strategy (RAPMS). The current RAPMS was required to be species led whereas a site led approach would be more desirable. The review of the current RAPMS has commenced. The new Strategy should result in an increased ability for Council to protect and enhance a more comprehensive and representative selection of indigenous ecosystems within the region.

5. Magnitude of the Programme

Over the past 12 months, 31 new sites have been assessed and allocated a regional priority score.

The total number of sites now stands at 331 with 168 in the Western Zone and 163 in the Wairarapa. A total of 82 (25%) sites have either had or been programmed for possum control. The average size of the sites is only 7 hectares although a much larger area than the actual site needs to be treated to cope with possum re-invasion.

In 1997/98, 18,000 hectares were treated and during the last financial year (98/99) the total was 9,390 hectares. There was a stronger focus on the metropolitan areas last year incurring higher operational costs and therefore less area being treated. The target this year is to complete approximately 14,000 hectares comprising 25 management areas.

A map of KNE areas previously treated, currently receiving treatment or programmed for possum control in the near future is attached as Appendix 1. The map shows 57 individual management areas. The balance of the 25 KNE sites are included within the Masterton Combined, Battersea, Pounui, Carterton East, Morisons Bush, Tauherenikau and Keith George management areas which all have multiple sites. All of the unshaded sites, except site 19 (Tora Coastal Bush), within the Wairarapa Constituencies are expected to come within the expanded Bovine TB control areas if this eventuates. Any future possum control for these sites will be under the Bovine Tb programme.

Some of the management areas have already undergone first and second maintenance. It is important to give priority to maintenance before commencing work in new areas. In spite of establishing 'buffer' areas, possum re-infestation is an ongoing problem. An example is the Porirua Scenic Reserve which is now in need of maintenance after having virtually every possum removed two years ago. In hindsight, it would have been preferable to have had an extended buffer.

It is only the enlargement of the Bovine Tb possum control programmes that has allowed the KNE programme to expand. The situation has now arisen

where further KNE prioritisation must occur to offset spreading available resources too thinly. A projected programme, based on regional priority scores, was completed to provide cost estimates for the Long Term Financial Strategy. This will require further refinement to recognise updated monitoring results, changes to management practices, and opportunities for external funding or resourcing.

6. Joint Ventures

Assistance with the KNE programme by way of joint ventures is still keenly pursued. Joint ventures, mainly through cost sharing, have been established for some time with Wellington, Hutt, Upper Hutt and Porirua City Councils. Kapiti Coast District has recently become more involved. The involvement with KNE programmes appears to be proportional to the amount of public parks and reserves each Council has responsibility for.

Wellington City has been particularly proactive with pest animal and pest plant control and it would be disappointing if the level of commitment were to decrease now that so many gains have been made. It would also be advantageous if other territorial authorities were to budget more adequately for possum control. Traditionally, most joint ventures have been on a 50/50 cost share basis. There has been a notable decrease this year in the amount of income received from joint venture work.

Private landowners are appreciative of the KNE programme on their properties but are rarely willing to commit resources other than some 'self help' work and that is often very limited.

The Upper Hutt Branch of the Forest and Bird Society continue to be enthusiastic supporters, having been actively involved with the successful Maidstone and Keith George Memorial/Silverstream projects. They are currently taking a lead role in the organisation and planning of the proposed Wi Tako operation. The efforts of this group of volunteers are very much appreciated and a wonderful example to others interested in preserving their heritage.

The YMCA Conservation Corps (Masterton) continue to assist with possum control at two KNE sites. They supply the labour and transport, with Council providing the materials and instruction.

Local resident groups from Plimmerton and Tawa have also offered to assist with KNE operations in their neighbourhood.

7. Communications and Promotions

The KNE programme has received good publicity during the past year. Every opportunity has been taken to encourage landowners to register their bush remnant with the KNE programme.

External publicity has occurred through articles in the NZ Local Government Magazine (Dec 99), the Animal Control Products Newsletter (Summer/Autumn 2000) and several regional and national newspaper reports in connection with the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary or 'Bring Back the Birds' campaign.

Other publicity avenues have occurred through supporting Forest and Bird initiatives, attendance at A&P Shows and various field days, reference in the State of the Environment Report, Rural Services Newsletter and at the Council's Internet site.

The KNE logo is also being used as a watermark for relevant correspondence.

The next major step in marketing the KNE brand is to establish signage at KNE sites. Whilst a suitable sign has been designed there is a need to ensure that the posting of such signs will not contravene Local Territorial Authority bylaws. This may be an issue where the KNE site is also a public reserve. It would be advantageous to be able to have a regional approach for such signage, similar to that of the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust.

8. Extending the Network

There has been a phenomenal increase in the amount of interest in ecological management over the past four years. This amount of interest was not foreseen when the RAPMS was developed in July 1996. The Biosecurity Act did not recognise this trend. The Act, being species based, has not been helpful for planning the protection and enhancement of indigenous biodiversity. However, there is a need to make the best of the situation in the interim until a revised RAPMS provides direction for the future. One means of achieving the right balance is to improve our liaison with other interested parties such as the Department of Conservation, Queen Elizabeth II Trust, Federated Farmers, Forest & Bird Society, Botanical Society, Wellington Plant Conservation Society, conservation minded community groups and other environmental advocacy groups. The study currently being carried out by Hertha James under a Royal Society Fellowship will increase our knowledge of the environmental objectives of these organisations, and provide a platform for expanding networking opportunities.

9. Recommendation

That the report be received and its contents noted.

Report prepared by:

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