

Significant Natural Areas

Questions and Answers

June 2021

What are Significant Natural Areas?

A Significant Natural Area (SNA) is defined as an area of native plants and habitat that has high ecological value. An SNA is selected based on criteria contained in Appendix 5 of the Regional Policy Statement for Northland.

SNAs are New Zealand's most important remnants of native habitat – places where rare or threatened plants or animals are still found. Habitat loss is one of the main threats to New Zealand's wildlife so it's important that we look after the significant areas we have left, whether they're on public or private land.

These areas have usually been looked after by previous and existing landowners, either intentionally or unintentionally. That's why they still exist. Many landowners recognise they have something special on their land that's worth protecting. Without the thousands of landowners across the country who have done this, we would have very few important places left outside of conservation land.

Why do we need SNAs?

We need SNAs because we need to protect our endangered indigenous biodiversity. Far North District Council is required by Northland's Regional Policy Statement to identify SNAs. The Council also has a responsibility under the Resource Management Act 1991 to protect areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna as a matter of national importance.

How many SNAs are in the Far North District?

A total of 685 SNAs have been identified by Wildlands Consultants. This covers 282,696 hectares, which is approximately 42% of the area of the Far North District. Of that 42%, approximately half of that area is public land (already zoned as conservation land) and half is in private ownership.

I have an SNA on my property. What does that mean I can and can't do?

If you are not planning on developing your land, then an SNA on your land means business as usual. However, the proposed District Plan will have rules around SNAs in terms of vegetation clearance and protection through the subdivision process. This means that you may need to apply for a resource consent if you are planning on clearing vegetation or establishing new uses of land within a SNA.

Will I be required to fence or formally protect the SNA on my property?

No. If you are not planning on developing or subdividing your property, there will be no requirement to formally protect the SNA through fencing, covenants or other methods. However, the proposed District Plan will have land use and subdivision rules associated with SNAs that may require you to protect the SNA if you plan to develop the land or clear vegetation. There may also be options for you to voluntarily protect the SNA formally, either through a Council conservation covenant or a private covenant (i.e. QEII).

Will I be compensated for having an SNA on my property?

No. However, there are a number of schemes that may incentivise protection; including rates remission for conservation covenants that are voluntarily applied to natural areas with ecological values.

How is this managed under the Operative District Plan?

Rules around vegetation clearance are covered in Chapter 12.2 of the Operative District Plan. The criteria relates to the amount of vegetation to be cleared, and the age of trees.

Chapter 13 on Subdivision refers to the DOC Protected Natural Areas maps when assessing the effects subdivision will have on indigenous flora and fauna. The new Indigenous Biodiversity chapter will refer directly to the SNA maps, which are contained in the plan.

How do I manage an SNA?

There is no special requirement to manage these areas. However, if you want to subdivide your land, a covenant maybe put on the area of the land that has been identified as an SNA. This is not that different to what would happen under existing planning rules, it just clarifies the rules.

Do SNAs affect what animals I can keep?

No. All existing uses in SNAs can continue. If there is stock grazing in an SNA, then that can continue. As for cats and dogs, it is already the case if you want to subdivide in high-density kiwi areas, a covenant may be placed on the subdivided land limiting or banning cats and dogs. SNAs do not include rules about cats and dogs.

Will an SNA affect 'non-SNA' parts of my property?

SNAs do not change planning rules that may already apply to other parts of your property outside the SNA.

What if I don't agree with the SNA assessment?

If you don't agree that the potential SNA on your property includes plants and habitat with high ecological value, then we want you to tell us. That is what the feedback period is for – to refine the desktop mapping exercise and correct any mistakes.

How did you assess the SNA on my property?

Most of the mapping was a desktop exercise using existing information and aerial photographs. We have conducted a small number of site visits but have not entered private property without permission.

Why didn't all the shareholders or trustees of our land receive a letter?

We sent SNA letters to the address listed as the ratepayer address. This alone was a significant undertaking with over 8000 letters sent to landowners. We anticipate that those receiving letters from the Council will forward information on SNAs to others with an interest in that land. All information in the letter can also be found online and is easily accessed from anywhere in the country or from overseas. This includes an online mapping tool (where any address can be searched) which should make it easy for others to see where SNA boundaries are. They can also search using the SNA number on the ecological report included in the letter. These reports are also available online. The mapping tool is available here: [Significant Natural Area Mapping](#)

What is the National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity?

The draft National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity (NPSIB) is a policy set by central government to guide councils on how to protect nature in their regions. Up until now, it's been up to each council to decide how to do this. Far North District Council currently uses Department of Conservation Protected Natural Areas Programme maps. These maps have not been updated since the 1990s.

The Resource Management Act was passed in 1991 and has required since then that areas of indigenous vegetation are protected, regardless of whether they are on public or private land. That requirement hasn't changed.

The problem is that many landowners and councils don't know which areas are significant, and even if they do, there's no legal clarity on what 'protection' means. The proposed NPSIB will standardise the criteria and policies that apply to SNAs, ensuring equity, and reducing expensive consenting costs.

Why is FNDC applying this now when the NPS is still a draft?

The Regional Policy Statement for Northland requires us to identify and map Significant Natural Areas. We must include them in the District Plan and we are currently doing consolidated review of the District Plan that will be notified in late 2021.

Several other councils have already gone through this process, including Lower Hutt City Council, Porirua City Council, New Plymouth District Council and Waikato District Council. West Coast Regional Council is also currently identifying SNAs.

Why do we need to identify SNAs on private land?

Land Care Research data shows that between 1996 and 2017, 84,000 hectares of native tussock, shrubland and forest was cleared across New Zealand. Most of this was on private land.

Today, 80 per cent of native birds, 88 per cent of lizards and 100 per cent of frogs are threatened with extinction. Despite the good work being done by many landowners, irreplaceable areas of nature are still being destroyed.

Why private land when we have so much public conservation land?

Many important ecosystems are nearly entirely restricted to private land. For example, many lowland forests remnants are privately owned, and not on conservation land. They are precious homes for wildlife because we have already felled most of these areas for our towns, industries and farms.

What do SNAs mean for landowners?

It's important to note that existing practices in or near SNAs will generally be able to continue. Existing grazing, tourism, or honey production for example can carry on. But these activities won't be able to intensify, and new activities won't be allowed to negatively affect SNAs.

The sorts of activities that might harm an SNA are felling trees for subdivision, or clearing bush to convert into pasture.

Will landowners be required to do weed and pest control?

Unless it is required under a Regional Pest Management Strategy, the council cannot require landowners to undertake weed or pest control in an SNA. Council has no plans to require active management of SNAs, unless a covenant is placed on the property through a subdivision process. Most conservation covenants require some active maintenance of the covenanted area, including pest management.

Next steps?

The draft NPSIB was developed following a two-year collaborative process involving Forest & Bird, Federated Farmers, the Conservation and Freshwater Iwi Leadership Group, the Forest Owners Association, the Environmental Defence Society, and a representative from the extractive/infrastructure industries.

The draft was then publicly consulted on, with 92% of submitters supporting the policy.

Minister Shaw, Associate Minister for the Environment, has indicated he will seek further submissions on an exposure draft in the coming months, before the NPSIB is approved by Cabinet and finally gazetted, at which point it becomes government policy.