

Submission by Environment Network Manawātū on the Simplifying Local Government Proposal

ENM is the environment hub for the Manawātū region, connecting and inspiring communities to take environmental action.

We provide sector leadership, build capacity and capability, and create community.

As a member-led group, we work alongside our network to share ideas, get things done, and push for positive change. We lead by example, supporting everyone in their mahi and making sure they have what they need to achieve their goals.

We believe in bringing people together. We help strengthen community connections, provide opportunities to meet others, and create spaces where people can talk about what's needed and work together to find solutions.

We're passionate about protecting the environment, and we know that to make a real difference, we need to stay strong ourselves. We focus on getting the right resources for the community and helping our network groups and locals build their skills. By encouraging learning, working together, and supporting volunteers, we help everyone make a positive impact.

Our Pou

ENM focuses on supporting activities in these four pou to achieve our vision:

1. Climate Action

We raise awareness about climate change and support community actions that encourage reduced carbon emissions, waste, and overconsumption, while promoting clean air and sustainable cities. Through advocacy and collaboration, we push for climate-friendly policies and hold local and central government accountable for meaningful action.

2. Biodiversity Protection & Enhancement

We protect and restore native species and improve water quality by supporting initiatives like Manawātū River Source to Sea, with a focus on preserving ecosystems and strengthening regional biodiversity for a healthier environment.

3. Community Food Sovereignty

We strive to ensure access to healthy, locally grown, sustainable and culturally appropriate food. By supporting networks like Manawātū Food Action Network, we help communities to grow their own food, make healthy food more accessible, reduce food waste, and provide free or affordable food to people.

4. Circular Economy

We aim for a thriving planet that sustains future generations by fostering a circular economy where resources are reused and valued. We connect and support community groups, provide education, and build strong networks to improve local practices. Through shared initiatives and upskilling, we empower people to make informed choices and contribute to sustainable change

Environment Network Manawātū (ENM) strongly opposes the Simplifying Local Government proposal in its current form.

While we recognise the need for continuous improvement in local government systems, we do not accept that the changes proposed will strengthen environmental protection, democratic accountability, or community wellbeing. On the contrary, we consider that the proposal risks weakening all three.

At its core, this reform appears driven by a desire to reduce perceived “complexity” and accelerate development. Simplification, however, is not a neutral act. What is being simplified, who benefits from that simplification, and what is lost in the process all matter. From an environmental and community perspective, the costs are likely to be high.

1. Erosion of Regional Environmental Governance

The proposal to replace directly elected regional councillors with Combined Territorial Authority Boards made up of mayors fundamentally weakens regional environmental leadership. Regional councils exist for good reason: environmental systems do not respect district boundaries, and effective management of rivers, aquifers, air sheds, biodiversity corridors, and coastal systems requires region-wide oversight and expertise.

Mayors are elected to represent their individual districts. They are not elected to act as regional environmental governors, nor are they selected for their environmental competence. Loading additional regional environmental responsibilities onto already overburdened mayors is not “streamlining”; it is dilution. The predictable result is that environmental considerations will be crowded out by short-term local political pressures.

ENM is deeply concerned that this change will reduce the quality, independence, and consistency of environmental decision-making across the region.

2. Weakening of Democratic Accountability

Direct election matters. It is one of the few tools communities have to hold decision-makers accountable for environmental outcomes. Replacing elected regional councillors with appointed or indirectly selected representatives significantly reduces democratic legitimacy and transparency.

Environmental protection is often inconvenient. It requires saying “no” to harmful activities, holding polluters to account, and enforcing limits. Those are exactly the kinds of decisions that become harder when accountability is blurred and responsibility is shared among people whose primary mandate lies elsewhere.

If the government is serious about local democracy, it should be strengthening regional representation, not dismantling it.

3. Risk of Centralisation and Political Override

ENM is particularly concerned about provisions that enable increased central government influence over local and regional decision-making. The possibility of Crown-appointed commissioners or central veto powers introduces a clear risk that environmental safeguards will be overridden in favour of economic or political priorities.

Environmental protection works best when grounded in local knowledge, community values, and long-term stewardship. Centralised decision-making, especially when combined with

development pressure, tends to privilege speed and scale over ecological integrity. That is not a trade-off New Zealand can afford.

4. Marginalisation of Community and Iwi Voices

Effective environmental governance depends on strong community participation and genuine partnership with mana whenua. The proposal does not convincingly demonstrate how community voice will be protected or enhanced under the new structures. Fewer elected representatives and more consolidated decision-making bodies typically mean fewer entry points for community engagement, not more.

For iwi, whose relationship with land and water is grounded in whakapapa and kaitiakitanga, this raises serious concerns. Environmental governance that sidelines mātauranga Māori and Treaty-based partnerships is unjust and environmentally reckless.

5. Environmental Risk Disguised as Administrative Reform

The proposal is framed as an administrative tidy-up. It is not. It is a structural shift with profound implications for how environmental limits are set, monitored, and enforced. There is a real risk that “simplification” becomes a euphemism for weakening safeguards, shortening processes, and reducing scrutiny.

From an environmental perspective, complexity is not always a problem. Sometimes it is the price of doing things properly. Ecosystems are complex. Catchments are complex. Climate impacts are complex. Pretending otherwise does not make them simpler; it just makes our responses poorer.

Conclusion

Environment Network Manawatū does not support the Simplifying Local Government proposal as currently designed. We believe it risks:

- weakening regional environmental leadership
- reducing democratic accountability
- centralising power in ways that undermine local stewardship
- marginalising community and iwi voices
- and ultimately degrading environmental outcomes.

If the government’s objective is genuinely to improve environmental protection, community wellbeing, and local democracy, this proposal needs fundamental rethinking. Efficiency must not be pursued at the expense of ecology, accountability, and participation. Some systems are complex because the world is complex. Good governance does not flatten that complexity; it engages with it honestly.

We urge the government to withdraw the proposal in its current form and undertake a more transparent, collaborative, and environmentally grounded review of how local and regional governance can be strengthened rather than hollowed out.