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RMA Disaster for Urban Trees

Do we cherish our coastal Pohutukawa or our park trees? Are trees important enough to be protected for future generations?

Ideology has decided the fate of our urban trees rather than logic.

Response to the Local Government and Environment Select Committee's recently released recommendations on submissions to the Resource Management (Streamlining and Simplifying) Amendment Bill 2009 have commented on some improvement for the environment.

However this is definitely not the case for urban trees! Clause 52, which bans general tree protection in urban environments, has been retained. One can almost hear the chainsaws revving up now. From 1st January 2012, local councils will no longer be able to retain their existing general tree protection rules in their district plans. From this October no local authority will be able to introduce such rules. Many believe this will have a devastating effect on our urban tree cover for the future.

The Select Committee ignored the majority of submitters to this issue who were against the inclusion of Clause 52. The committee also totally ignored the invited recommendations from the New Zealand Arboricultural Association on how to revise the existing tree protection rules to make them less prescriptive, easier to implement and less costly to administer. It is well recognised that changes are needed, but this recommendation is a sledgehammer edict, when the ability to make appropriate changes to the processes are readily available for discussion.

Whilst this greatly effects the Auckland region, which in itself is home to one third of New Zealand's population, this change in legislation should also be a concern for rapidly developing towns and cities that will be subject to the effects of local environmental degradation through future tree loss.

So why do we need general tree protection?

Tree protection rules signal that society recognises the contribution that trees make to the well being of society and the environment. Trees are a community asset, with their positive effects going beyond the tree's area of immediate influence, and not just an individual's property right.

Overseas studies have substantiated the varied benefits that trees bring to the urban environment, even increasing revenue in business districts. Good tree cover

supports the soil structure and provides stability for river banks and coastal cliffs. It reduces the amount spent on storm water/silt control and health care. Many countries throughout the world have strong legislation to protect mature trees and New Zealand needs to be part of that awareness.

Submitters to the Select Committee cited a range of other benefits that trees give to us in our everyday urban lives. They provide huge pleasure to many people where they work and live – often not recognised until the trees are removed.

Trees provide privacy within built up areas – from neighbour's windows; in overlooked outdoor living spaces; from elevated buildings; within local gardens and public parks. They screen structures and spaces - whether a new garage, an office/apartment block, or a bare car parking area. They also provide shade in summer for people to walk, play or sit under; and shade buildings.

They give our children the chance to climb, to make huts, to have natural swings. They maintain a sense of history, of place and provide permanence when all around is undergoing change. As a people we move properties on average each 7 years – trees take generations to mature.

Furthermore, because trees transpire oxygen and absorb CO₂ they sequester our carbon; and many tree varieties are good at reducing pollutants in the air, especially important within city boundaries. As such, due consideration is needed before a decision is taken to fell such mighty and important living organisms.

Death by a thousand cuts

If this Clause is retained in the Bill, not only will developers be able to clear fell a site with impunity, they will not even have to mitigate this by planting replacement trees. Trees which previously were refused permission to be felled, on the grounds of their contribution to the community and the environment, will be prime candidates for imminent felling, as will be many coastal Pohutukawa.

The Bill states that the only means of tree protection is by listing specific trees in councils' district plans. This is a time consuming and very costly process that will require the permission of the private owner of the relevant trees; it will require constant monitoring; it will be uniformly incomplete, and require notified plan changes. Only trees of special historical, botanical or amenity value have previously been considered for listing, and in the Auckland region alone there are currently only 1700 listed, a fraction of the potential, let alone other good specimens of tree.

Why has this government chosen to jeopardise the urban tree cover our region currently enjoys for the sake of an illusory cost-cutting exercise and individual property rights? Instead of removing tree protection rules entirely, as this Bill will do, there is plenty of room for discussion on ways to reduce costs to councils to administer these rules. Many of these have already been discussed between interested parties and there is general consensus on the way forward.

The Bill will have its second reading very shortly. Everyone who values urban trees should take a keen interest in the Select Committee's recommendations and urgently contact their local National MPs to make their views known on this appalling decision to retain Clause 52.