

**Hon Dr Nick Smith MP
National Party Environment/RMA Spokesman**

**Northern Regional Conference
Speech to Environmental Forum
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John Key is determined that National is as successful in protecting New Zealand's environment as we are in growing the economy.

Our job this morning is to shake down some of our ideas so we can put to the electorate next year a dynamic plan for lifting New Zealand's environmental management.

I acknowledge my fellow panellists, Samara Sutherland and Guy Salmon.

Samara and I share a passion for marine protection. My last experience in Whangarei as Minister of Conservation was facing a fishing protest over the creation of the Poor Knights Marine Reserve. I recently ran into one of the antagonists who today is a strong defender of the reserve.

We need more such reserves, and we need a new Marine Reserve Act and Samara is one of New Zealand's environmental foot soldiers to that end.

I also welcome Guy Salmon, the Executive Director of Ecologic and New Zealand's top thinker on how we marry together economic success and good environment management.

Guy has been a key advisor on the Bluegreens Vision document and will be contributing to this panel on the tests National will need to pass to be credible on the environment in Election '08.

This morning, I do not wish to recanvass the many ideas in National's Bluegreen vision document. Instead I want to push the barrow on one simple but important idea.

This idea is based on the simple proposition: **we manage what we measure.**

New Zealand had an appalling record of fiscal management through the 1970s and 1980s. One of National's achievements in the early 1990s was the Fiscal Responsibility Act requiring open and honest public sector financial reporting.

We have subsequently gone from having one of the highest levels of public debt in the OECD to the lowest. Honest data drives better policy.

John Key, in his keynote speech on education in April, extended this philosophy to literacy and numeracy. Our policy is to require upfront reporting to parents on

pupils reading, writing and numerical skills and for schools to have to report annually on their whole school performance.

I have no doubt it will focus boards, principals, teachers and parents on ensuring our children learn to read, write and do maths.

My proposition today is that we need an Environment Reporting Act. We need a comprehensive and regular report on the state of our environment so New Zealanders know both the quality of their natural environment, and whether it is getting better or worse.

Nature's clock ticks more slowly than a child's learning and more slowly than finance. I propose a five yearly reporting regime. In Australia, five-yearly reporting is a legal requirement. In the UK, reports were published in 2000 and 2005. In Norway, reports have been published every two years since 1997. Canada and the US have also been producing regular State of the Environment reports.

These reports need to cover the key physical elements of our environment – the quality of our water, air and soils, and our natural capital like the state of our forests and our native species – and it needs to be nationwide.

Our first State of the Environment Report was produced during Simon Upton's tenure as Minister for the Environment in 1997. It provides a good baseline.

Labour Ministers have steadfastly refused to produce an update despite repeated requests across the board from environmental organisations. I suspect they refuse because it will tell a sorry story of deterioration in so many areas and will expose Labour's poor record of environmental stewardship.

Instead, they produced a glossy booklet titled "Gentle Footprints: boots 'n' all" and gave everyone a yellow children's left gumboot. The yellow was fitting for the lack of courage in actually saying anything useful.

Alongside 126 glossy pictures, it tells us "New Zealand is as beautiful as beauty is in this world. Beautiful in nature but also beautiful in management." Our environment deserves better than such flowery platitudes.

For this reporting to have credibility, it must be free of the culture of spin. In the financial area we assure this with the independent Auditor-General.

The problem with DOC, the Ministry for the Environment and Regional Councils, is that they are key authorities with responsibility for protecting the environment, and will have strong incentives not to report frankly on where the environment is in decline or where policy is failing.

That is why National is proposing that such reporting be the responsibility of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment.

The Commissioner was established in 1988 and it has produced truckloads of reports – over 135 in total. The problem is few have resulted in concrete action.

We will not remove the discretion for the PCE to identify specific areas of investigation, but we will require a comprehensive five yearly report. We believe this requirement will actually help the Commission focus their investigations in areas where we are failing our environment.

So there you have it:

A new Environment Reporting Act so New Zealanders might have once every five years an honest and frank report on the state of our environment.

It will help focus us as a nation on keeping us true to that 100% pure brand.