



Editorial: Central government needs to help councils deal with coastal hazards

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Central government will have to get more directly involved in dealing with coastal hazards rather than leaving it all to local authorities.

OPINION: Twenty-five thousand property owners will have to consider the implications for their homes and investments after an updated report was released on how rising sea levels will affect Christchurch.

The risk to a maximum of 25,000 properties from seawater inundation, and another 1000 from coastal erosion, will be realised over a very long time – the new report by Tonkin and Taylor for the Christchurch City Council looks ahead to the year 2120.

However, the implications will kick in long before then.

An earlier study resulted in information about the long-term outlook for individual properties being included on council records, causing upset for homeowners who feared for the impact on their property values. Land Information Memorandums (LIMs) have been updated to take account of the latest report, as is required by law.

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Insurance companies say the shift towards evaluating properties in line with projected climate change risks has already started. Expect premiums to rise as flooding becomes increasingly more likely, and some properties will eventually become uninsurable.

In Christchurch, the areas affected include coastal suburbs, obviously, but also low-lying areas around the estuary and rivers.

How far the sea is likely to encroach is a matter for debate. Latest science suggests that global sea levels could be raised by a metre this century, depending on the rate and extent of climate change.

This will bring increased risks not just to Christchurch. Many towns and cities in New Zealand are on the coast. Parts of Dunedin, Wellington and Napier are also especially at risk.

But the mean sea level rise is not the only danger. Climate change is also likely to bring more extreme rainfall and more coastal storms. [Expect the flooding seen this year in places](#) including Christchurch, Selwyn, Timaru, Dunedin, Whanganui, Rangitikei and the Bay of Plenty to become more frequent.

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Despite this being a slow-developing national concern, the job of anticipating, planning for and trying to compensate for rising sea levels is devolved to local authorities. The Ministry for the Environment provides information and guidance manuals, but it is the job of councils to handle the consequences of climate change, including sea level rise, in their local communities.

In some ways this is appropriate. Different places in New Zealand have widely different conditions and different levels and extent of risk. Local authorities are the repositories of a mass of information relevant to their own areas. Locally appropriate solutions are more likely to arise from local knowledge.

On the other hand, councils should not be expected to continually reinvent the wheel, and some will not have the resources to do so. The risk will extend to national infrastructure including coastal highways and railways. Solutions will have common applications in different areas. New technologies and engineering techniques will emerge which will draw upon national and international research.

Because local councils tend to shy away from controversy and backlash, they may also be conservative in their planning when bolder and more courageous initiatives might be better in the longer term.

The number of properties potentially affected in Christchurch extrapolated across the whole country suggests a problem too big for local authorities to solve. Sooner or later, central government will have to get more directly involved. It may as well be sooner.

- The Press

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