



Report 19.342
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Committee Council
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Declaring a climate emergency

1. Purpose

To outline the options for Council on whether, and how, it might declare a climate emergency.

2. Background

At their meeting on 20 May 2019, the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) Climate Change Working Group unanimously agreed that GWRC should join other councils in declaring a climate emergency. On 20 June, the Environment Committee considered the recommendation, and requested staff to prepare an information paper for the 8 August Environment Committee meeting (**Attachment 1**), to be followed by a paper providing options to be presented to the 21 August Council meeting.

At a meeting on 8 August 2019, the Environment Committee recommended that officers draft a declaration statement for approval by Council, should they agree to announce a “Climate Emergency”. They requested information on the cost of inaction also be included in the 21 August 2019 Council paper to further enable informed discussions.

Four of the region’s councils have already declared climate emergencies: Kāpiti Coast District Council, Wellington City Council, Porirua City Council and Hutt City Council. Environment Canterbury, Auckland Council, Bay of Plenty and Hawke’s Bay regional councils have also declared climate emergencies.

At this same Council meeting, Council will be considering establishing an emissions reduction target for the organisation. This decision will have a bearing on the suitability of the options set out in this paper, which is prepared in advance of the decision taken by Council at this meeting.

3. Comment

Our modern financial decision frameworks discount the value of investments or decisions whose returns occur well into the future¹.

We now have sufficient knowledge and an array of solutions to limit the damage and prevent catastrophic climate change, but regionally, nationally and globally, human-induced greenhouse gas emissions are still rising.

GWRC's role is to support the region and its communities to better understand and proactively respond to these challenges, risks and opportunities. Declaring a 'climate emergency' is one opportunity for the Council to further highlight the importance of and urgent need to address climate change issues.

The information paper (**Attachment 1**) includes a stocktake of GWRC's existing climate change programme. GWRC has a strong programme of work underway and is arguably taking more action on the climate crisis than most other local government bodies in New Zealand².

A common theme that has been identified in the responses announced by other councils that have declared emergencies is that the declarations are not about instilling fear, but rather about instigating change.

Were GWRC to declare a climate emergency, the urgency and scale of the change response should align to when Council's priorities and spending plans are to be revisited to provide more focus and priority to climate related initiatives. Council will be consulting on the Annual Plan for 2020/2021 early next year and the 2021-31 Long Term Plan in late 2020/early 2021. These processes would provide the opportunity to realign resource allocation priorities.

Demonstrating leadership in ensuring that a climate emergency declaration was meaningful would require the full involvement of the organisation to change how climate change issues are approached across all council business.

As previously advised, however, as a declaration of a 'climate emergency' has no legal definition or statutory obligations, the action that the Council takes following a declaration is wholly at its discretion.

4. Communication

A media release has been prepared.

5. Consideration of climate change

The matters requiring decision in this report have been considered by officers in accordance with the process set out in the GWRC Climate Change Consideration Guide.

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20190109-the-perils-of-short-termism-civilisations-greatest-threat>

² <https://www.lgnz.co.nz/our-work/publications/stocktake-of-local-government-mitigation-activity/>

5.1 Mitigation assessment

Officers have considered the effect of the matter on the climate. They are central to the report's purpose.

Officers note that the matter does not directly affect the Council's present interests in the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) or the Permanent Forest Sink Initiative (PFSI.)

5.2 Adaptation assessment

Officers have considered the impacts of climate change in relation to the matter. They are central to the report's purpose.

6. The decision-making process and significance

Officers have considered the significance of the matter, taking into account the Council's significance and engagement policy and decision-making guidelines. Officers recommend that the matter be considered to have different levels of significance depending on the option chosen.

7. Options

Officers consider that all of the reasonably practicable options have been appropriately identified and assessed. The options considered can be implemented separately or in any combination, but for presentation purposes they are described under four main options that represent an increasing level of ambition:

- 1. Do not declare a climate emergency**
- 2. Declare climate emergency (no additional action)**
- 3. Declare a climate emergency and announce a carbon neutrality target**
- 4. Declare a climate emergency, announce a carbon neutrality target and announce additional action on climate change**

Advantages, disadvantages, significance, promotion of community outcomes and impact on capacity to meet present and future needs are assessed and included in **Attachment 2**. Option 4 includes the announcement of additional action on climate change.

Should Council choose to announce additional action on climate change, a proposed ten point 'Regional Climate Emergency Action Plan' is attached (**Attachment 3**). This plan is indicative only, and will be subject to further feasibility assessment and community consultation, where required.

Officers consider that any more intensive identification and assessment of options than has been undertaken is not warranted at this time.

8. Statement on declaring a climate emergency

The following draft statement has been drafted for Council's consideration, should it be agreed to declare a climate emergency:

“At its Council meeting on 21 August 2019 Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) declared a Climate Emergency in recognition of the mounting advice from scientists and growing evidence of the impacts already being felt in the region.

There is a small window for action to avoid the most damaging effects of climate change. Climate change is the biggest environmental challenge we have ever faced and it affects everyone in the region.

Research commissioned by GWRC shows that since records began in 1890, sea levels have risen nearly 30cm in the Wellington region, which represents over 30% of the tidal range. In addition, records of vertical land motion show that the region is currently subsiding tectonically at the same rate as sea level is rising. This means that, at present, the relative sea level trend is effectively double the long term annual average.

This sea-level rise is already having impacts on our activities and infrastructure in coastal areas. The Cook Strait/Wellington areas and the east coast of the region are more vulnerable to storm inundation and rates of coastal erosion due to their smaller tidal range when compared to other parts of New Zealand. We are also seeing an upward trend in temperature across the Wellington Region.

The situation requires urgent action if we are to contribute to reducing our impact on the climate and limiting damage. It is essential to start reducing emissions where we can now as it will take time to decarbonise the regional economy in the most just and equitable way.

Greater Wellington Regional Council is declaring a climate emergency.”

9. Recommendations

That the Council:

1. *Receives the report.*
2. *Notes the content of the report.*

Either

3. *Agrees to declare a climate emergency.*
4. *Agrees to issue a statement outlining the reasons for this declaration.*
5. *Determines what, if any, additional action will be announced to accompany this declaration.*

Or

6. *Agrees not to declare a climate emergency.*

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Attachment 1: What is a Climate Emergency? (Information Paper) and Attachment

Attachment 2: Options assessment

Attachment 3: 'Regional Climate Emergency Action Plan' for option 4