
Te Runanga Papa Atawhai O Tāmaki Makaurau
Auckland Conservation Board

Board File Ref: ABC-1949

16 June 2017

Hon Maggie Barry, Minister of Conservation
Hon Simon Bridges, Minister of Transport
Dr Jan Wright, Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

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Dear Minister Barry, Minister Bridges and Dr Wright

RE: Environmental Risk from Niagara Shipwreck

I am writing to draw your attention to the potential significant environmental hazard posed by the Niagara shipwreck to the Hauraki Gulf Islands.

The Niagara was sunk in 120 metres of water by a German mine in June 1940 north-west of the Mokohinau Islands and fuel oil continues to leak from the wreck. The Board has heard from Councillor Mike Lee; Keith Gordon who has authored a book about the Niagara; and Clive Sharp, salvage expert, that the wreck after 76 years is in a deteriorated condition and will collapse in time, posing a major environmental risk for the Gulf.

An estimated 1600 tonnes of fuel is believed likely to remain in tanks in the rear of the wreck and with the wreck continuing to deteriorate, there is a need to extract the oil to prevent a major catastrophe such as the Rena spill here in the Gulf. We understand there is more oil on this vessel than the Rena so the impacts could be even greater.

Our Board is concerned that there is a “ticking time bomb” in our region and with the potential to impact the Waitemata Harbour. The Sea Change marine spatial plan has recommended that the oil be removed from the wreck.

It is our understanding that the wreck comes under the jurisdiction of the New Zealand Government as a wartime wreck. Maritime NZ would be the lead agency responsible for coordinating the clean-up but we are told that it is without a budget to conduct the work. We ask the Government to make this a priority.

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The Board strongly recommends that funding is allocated to remove the oil from the Niagara now rather than waiting until the wreck erodes further and fuel is spilled into the Gulf creating an ecological disaster. Oil slicks up to 15 kilometres long have already been seen from the wreck and a major spill would affect many of the 27 species of sea birds that live in the Hauraki Gulf, including Cook's petrel, storm petrel, black petrel, Pycroft's petrel and fairy tern. Ecologists have expressed their concern about the risk to breeding colonies and habitat.

We applaud the Government's commitment to be Predator Free by 2050 and that this is necessary to deliver the "Battle for our Birds". If the Niagara releases its remaining fuel, the birds on our offshore islands will be under immediate threat and the investment by the Department in protecting our birds would be undermined. Accordingly, we ask that urgent attention is given to making the wreck safe and removing the fuel oil from the Niagara.

This is a preventable environmental disaster. It is better to act now to minimise the effects than to let the wreck totally fail in the next decade or so and have a catastrophic effect.

Yours faithfully



Lyn Mayes

Chair – Auckland Conservation Board

Cc:

Members, Auckland Conservation Board
Members, Northland Conservation Board
Members, New Zealand Conservation Authority
Lou Sanson, Director-General, Department of Conservation
Blair O'Keefe, Chair Maritime New Zealand
Councillor Mike Lee, Auckland Council

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