New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Environment Committee
Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Taiao

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2022/23 Annual review of the Department of Conservation

Presented to the House of Representatives
by David MacLeod, Chairperson

Contents

Department of Conservation

Recommendation
The Environment Committee has conducted the annual review of the Department of Conservation for 2022/23, and recommends that the House take note of its report.

About the Department of Conservation | Te Papa Atawhai

The Department of Conservation | Te Papa Atawhai (DOC) is responsible for protecting and caring for New Zealand's natural environment and historic and cultural heritage. It was established by the Conservation Act 1987. Its area of responsibility stretches from the Kermadec Islands in the north to the subantarctic archipelago in the south.

The department's mandated roles are to:

- protect land, species, ecosystems, and cultural heritage for conservation purposes
- manage threats and adverse impacts
- be a voice for conservation
- connect people to nature.

DOC manages one-third of New Zealand's land area as public conservation land and waters. It is the largest provider of visitor activities in New Zealand. At June 2023, DOC had 2,663 staff working at more than 100 locations across the country. This was an increase of 99 staff since 2021/22.

The department administers 25 Acts of Parliament, contributes to others, and is the lead government agency for conservation. DOC is responsible for implementing conservation-related redress in more than 60 legislated Treaty settlements. Key strategies and frameworks which guide the department's work include Te Mana o te Taiao–Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy,[1] and the New Zealand–Aotearoa Tourism Strategy.[2] DOC is a delivery agency for the Predator Free 2050 Strategy,[3] and a monitoring agency for this work.

The department works with the Ministry for Primary Industries and the Ministry for the Environment in the Natural Resources Cluster. This was a pilot introduced in Budget 2022, where the three agencies collaborate on a three-year programme of common objectives.

We met with Penny Nelson, the Director-General and chief executive of the Department of Conservation, to discuss DOC's performance in 2022/23.

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1 Te Mana o te Taiao–Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy 2020 is available on the website of the Department of Conservation.

2 The New Zealand–Aotearoa Tourism Strategy is available on the website of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

3 The Predator Free 2050 Strategy is available on the website of the Department of Conservation.

Summary of 2022/23 performance and audit results

In 2022/23, the department's revenue was $660.94 million, and its expenditure was $607.36 million. The department ended the financial year with a surplus of $53.58 million. Revenue was $10.8 million more than budgeted because DOC received a bequest of $13.6 million. This was offset by lower than budgeted grants and sponsorship revenue. Expenses were $44.7 million less than budgeted, mainly due to delays in the timing of programmes, and unallocated budgets for Jobs for Nature.

Financial trends

	2019/20 $million	2020/21 $million	2021/22 $million	2022/23 $million	Change in 2022/23
Revenue	517.67	590.93	601.32	660.94	9.91%
Expenditure	483.86	542	576.53	607.36	5.35%
Net surplus or (deficit)	33.81	48.93	24.79	53.58	

Non-financial performance

The department measures its progress against its four strategic outcomes through a series of performance indicators. In addition, DOC reports against a range of outcome measures.

We note that, although the department reports high achievement in meeting its own performance targets, the outcomes for species and ecosystems are not so positive. For example, in 2022/23 DOC met 15 of its 17 targets for biodiversity-related outcomes, but at the same time reported that threats to biodiversity were increasing. Some of us see a disconnect between the story that DOC tells of its own positive performance, and the bleak outlook the department paints of many aspects of the parts of New Zealand's deteriorating natural environment for which the department is responsible. This is expanded upon on page 8.

DOC told us that, to address this disconnect, it will be working with the Auditor-General to establish clearer outcome measures and a broader range of output measures over the next few years. It acknowledges that although the department may be meeting its own outputs, the scale of work it is funded for is currently insufficient to overcome the increasing environmental challenges New Zealand faces, such as climate change.

The two biodiversity targets that DOC did not meet related to areas treated for possums and weeds. DOC explained that the output for possum control was in fact met, but the work was recorded under the targets for rats and stoats, which were the main priorities in the areas treated. However, in relation to the target for weed control, deliberate decisions were made to divert those resources to management of more urgent pests, such as rat incursions on offshore islands.

Audit results

The Auditor-General issued a non-standard audit report, drawing attention to uncertainties relating to disclosures about greenhouse gas emissions in DOC's performance report.

The auditor rated DOC's performance information and supporting systems and controls as "good", with some recommendations for improvements. However, as noted below, the auditor found inadequacies in other aspects of the department's systems and controls.

Management control environment

The auditor rated DOC's management control environment as "needs improvement". The department has received this rating every year since 2018/19. Areas of concern for the auditor in 2022/23 included:

- a large turnover of finance personnel, and an ineffective transfer of knowledge to new financial staff, which resulted in difficulties in meeting audit and reporting deadlines
- insufficient communication across teams, leading to errors in reported financial information
- ongoing issues with procurement.

The auditor noted that DOC continues to undertake a multi-year corporate services programme. This is expected to result in an improved rating for the management control environment over time.

Financial information and supporting systems and controls

This was downgraded to "needs improvement" for 2022/23. Key issues included:

- five breaches of appropriations
- challenges in the implementation of the new finance system, and gaps in the control environment for the system
- some incorrect calculations in manual processes.

The auditor noted that DOC transitioned to a new finance system, which was responsible for some of these issues. The auditor expects that next year's grading could return to "good" as staff become more familiar with the new system.

Appropriation breaches

DOC reported that it exceeded five appropriations during the 2022/23 year, by the following amounts:

- *Community Conservation Funds*—$1.101 million
- *Management of recreational opportunities*—$6.144 million
- *Provision for bad and doubtful debts*—$0.425 million
- *Impairment of public conservation land*—$32.129 million in total, dating back to the 2017/18 financial year.
- *Molesworth Recreational Reserve*—underspending of $16.510 million (Non-Departmental Other Expenses) and overspending of $11.691 million (Non-Departmental Capital Expense appropriation) because of an incorrect accounting treatment identified through audit.

We are concerned to hear about these breaches of appropriations, as no public organisation should incur spending without the authority of Parliament. We asked DOC to explain how the breaches occurred, and what the department has done to ensure that they will not recur.

The department said that overall spending was within its departmental appropriations. The breaches did not result in spending more than approved. It explained that two of the breaches–*Molesworth Recreational Reserve* and *Impairment of conservation land*–did not involve cash spending but resulted from reassessments in accounting practices.

The *Community Conservation Funds* breach in 2022/23 was the result of a miscalculation in a transfer from the 2022/23 to the 2023/24 year. This will be offset by reduced expenditure in 2023/24.

The breach concerning *Management of recreational opportunities* was an adjustment between two appropriations in which overspending in one area was matched by underspending in the other. The debts occurred when DOC concessionaire Ruapehu Alpine Lifts entered liquidation.

The department told us it does not expect to have circumstances that would give rise to similar breaches again. It has strengthened its processes to reduce that risk. It has also undertaken system upgrades to improve financial information forecasts and sharing of financial information. DOC is also working with the Treasury to see where multi-year appropriations can be used to reduce expense transfers between financial years.

Corporate services improvement programme

The department is halfway through a 5-year corporate services improvement programme. In 2022/23 this included implementing an upgraded financial and asset management online system.

We were told that the system gives real-time financial information for workers in the field and improves forecasting against expenditure. The new system has also improved delegated financial authorities, so that expenditure approvals and controls are better managed. Improvements have also been made to procurement and contract management under the corporate services programme. The department said that while these systems are fundamental, it did not previously have them. DOC believes the new system will address the improvements required by the auditor.

Cost pressures and financial sustainability

Vote Conservation (from which DOC is funded) has increased from around $500 million in 2018/19 to $880 million in 2023/24. The Vote is due to decrease to $728 million by 2026/27 as Jobs for Nature and other programmes conclude. In its briefing to the incoming Minister of Conservation, the department noted that recent increases to Vote Conservation have mostly been provided to fund other groups and organisations, rather than for core DOC activities.[4]

[4] The briefing to the incoming Minister of Conservation, November 2023 is available on the website of the Department of Conservation.

Financial sustainability review

We heard that DOC feels "spread too thin" and that it is not currently financially sustainable for the work it is asked to do. We were told, "we can't do everything everywhere".

DOC is undertaking an in-depth review to provide advice to Ministers on options that would put the department's work on a sustainable funding path. We were told that the first phase of the review confirmed that the current size and scale of the department is unaffordable.

The department undertook a similar review and cost-cutting exercise in 2020/21 to address a $28 million budget deficit, caused by reduced income from international visitors and domestic tourists during COVID-19 border closures and lockdowns. We heard that it managed to find those savings. Similarly, it expects to meet current governmental directives to cut costs by 6.5 percent. Some of us expressed a view that these additional cuts, when the department is already struggling, would be disastrous.

Some savings have been enabled through simplification and innovation. For example, we heard that rangers had been working with 33 systems. DOC has simplified this, so rangers will have one system for all their work, enabling them to spend more time in the field. However, these changes alone will not be sufficient to address funding shortfalls.

The department said that its role and functions have increased over time, but its funding has not. We asked whether "mission creep" was playing a part in the expansion of DOC's role, where responsibilities have grown without relativity to the funding given for them. It told us that there has never been a comprehensive review of the department's role and funding, but that one is needed. For example, we heard that tracks on conservation land have increased by 329 percent. In contrast, operating funding has only increased by 83 percent in the same period. DOC envisages ongoing demands to deliver more.

The department's intention in phase 2 of the financial sustainability review is to make choices clear so that Ministers can make decisions based on good information about implications and opportunities. An example given was that DOC is currently funded to look after 2 percent of threatened species. It intends to prepare clear advice for Ministers about the implications of different options for funding levels, and what DOC could achieve with increased or decreased funding.

We support the work the department is undertaking to assist decisions about prioritisation of its conservation work. Some of us were concerned to hear that $483,260 was spent to trap a single stoat on Te Kākahu-o-Tamatea–Chalky Island, plus an additional $210,026 for ongoing surveillance installation and biosecurity planning. We recognise that one stoat could spell the end of a kākāpō conservation project, and it could set up a chain reaction that affects other potentially predator-free environments. However, some of us note the effect of such an operation taking place at such a cost, and the implications for that on other potential breaches.

External funding

The department is also assessing external funding opportunities and options including the international visitor levy. It expects to provide options about the international visitor levy to Ministers soon.

DOC also has enduring partnerships with several entities, and we were told that a range of businesses and philanthropic organisations have indicated an interest in investing in conservation. Parts of the business sector wish to address nature-related risks to and from their activities, and to include natural capital in their business reporting. The department is considering preparing a prospectus of opportunities for investment.

Work is being undertaken on the potential for biodiversity credits, as well as carbon sequestration in the conservation estate. These kinds of schemes could allow farmers, businesses, and other groups to offset carbon emissions with environmental projects. We heard that such schemes need to be based on credible science and measurement, and that research towards this is being undertaken across the natural resources sector.

DOC and the Ministry for the Environment consulted on market-based tools for addressing biodiversity in 2023.[5] They expect to report back on options in 2024.

Legislative and regulatory settings

We were told that the legislative and regulatory system that underpins the department's work is complex and out of date. The department described an old system of regional conservation boards and conservation management strategies and plans, which have now been overlaid with its responsibilities for Treaty settlements. We recognise that work is needed to modernise the legislative and regulatory settings for DOC's work.

In its briefing to the incoming Minister, the department said there was a choice to be made: improve the system within existing settings, or reform the legislation.

Some of us noted that this is a strong theme in the briefing to the incoming Minister, but it is less clear in the department's annual report. While both documents are publicly available, the annual report seems to be a document aimed more at the public, while the briefing is aimed more at the Minister. Some of us had some concerns about whether the annual report was sufficiently transparent in ensuring the New Zealand public is aware of the choices that need to be made in the conservation portfolio.

Management of assets

DOC manages an extensive conservation estate, which includes about 8.7 million hectares of land, 4.5 million hectares of water, 14,407 species of plants and animals, 21,853 visitor assets, and 15,000km of track. In its briefing to the incoming Minister of Conservation, the department indicated that it now manages more assets than it can afford to maintain. Issues include:

- a growing backlog of deferred maintenance work
- the ongoing transfer of low-value, high-cost assets to DOC
- inflation eroding the level of services the department can deliver in some areas
- investment in heritage assets being deprioritised in favour of critical actions to protect threatened species or failing visitor infrastructure, or to respond to weather events

[5] The discussion paper exploring a biodiversity credit system for Aotearoa New Zealand is available on the website of the Ministry for the Environment.

- the escalating risk to ecosystems and outdoor recreation and heritage sites posed by climate change and severe weather events.

DOC told us that if departmental funding was evenly spread across all DOC managed land and water, it would provide $56 per hectare to work with. We asked whether there had been a transfer of expenditure from DOC's traditional role of asset management into regulatory and policy work, and whether that had contributed to a deterioration in asset management. The department told us that there has been investment available to build or obtain new properties, as well as land and property gifted to the department. However, there has been insufficient investment to maintain those assets.

DOC believes underinvestment in the renewal and replacement of assets is reaching a critical level. It told us that its recreation assets are worth $714 million, but that it costs $102 million a year to operate and maintain them. DOC estimates that it will need $438 million over the next 10 years to replace end-of-life assets. It suggested that Ministers will need to decide whether to invest more to maintain assets, or to reduce the number of assets DOC owns and manages.

The department has been looking at how similar decisions are made overseas. It noted that, in Australia, if funding is not provided to maintain a specific asset, the asset is removed so that the agency does not bear the risks—such as health and safety responsibilities—for assets that have not been well maintained.

Recovery from natural disasters

DOC said the cost of recovery from natural disasters, such as severe weather events, has been increasing sharply. Until recently, responding to the effects of storms cost around $3 million per year. However, DOC's response to South Island flooding in 2020 cost $13 million over four years, and recovery of the visitor infrastructure from Cyclone Dovi in 2022 cost $12 million. Further, DOC estimates that it has about $74 million worth of work to complete the recovery from Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023.

The department said that losing access to DOC assets, even temporarily, affects regional economies. As well as needing to get visitor assets such as huts and tracks back up to standard, the department has been focusing on the effects of climate change and severe weather events on its biodiversity and conservation work. It told us this has been "incredibly sobering", giving an example of kiwi starving in parts of New Zealand where that has never been seen previously, because of changing temperatures.

The department is focusing on developing longer-term adaptation plans alongside its immediate response work. This has included assessing over a thousand threatened species to better understand the increased risks they face. We heard that it may also need to include reassessing the visitor network, and whether assets should be rebuilt after natural disasters in the same way and the same place, or built back differently.

Being a good neighbour

Having responsibility for one-third of New Zealand's land area also comes with responsibilities to be a good land manager and a good neighbour. We heard that DOC has more neighbours than anyone else in the country. We asked whether the department thinks it is a good neighbour and how that is determined.

There is no specific funding for these neighbourly responsibilities, and DOC told us it is also not recognised clearly in DOC's cost structure. For example, the department shares responsibilities with neighbours for around 1,500–2,000km of fencing, and it has other responsibilities in communities for amenities such as carparking, and remediating potholes and graffiti. These are not matters specifically related to its core conservation and recreation functions, but are a result of sharing land borders with other New Zealand property owners.

The department told us it can be difficult to prioritise pest and weed control that is core and critical to its biodiversity functions over the same activities that are carried out primarily to meet expectations of neighbours. It noted that pests and weeds do not respect DOC boundaries and can overflow onto neighbours' property. As an example, wilding pines are spreading in the Mackenzie Country, which is an ongoing environmental concern. DOC has been issued a notice by Environment Canterbury to control rabbits on its land, and it is also responding to concerns about wallabies in the Bay of Plenty and South Canterbury. Rabbits and wallabies are not high priorities as ecological pests but are a landowner responsibility for the department.

The department already works with neighbours, including farmers and local councils, on matters such as pest control. It is seeking to align that work more closely. DOC is reassessing its monitoring framework as it seeks to expand monitoring of pest animals and plants. It is considering how to use technology to understand what is happening at a local level, and at a high level. This could include trail cameras that use artificial intelligence to detect predators, especially on predator-free offshore islands that are in swimming distance of the mainland for many predators.

Some of us are concerned that there are insufficient measures to determine whether the department is meeting its responsibilities as a good neighbour.

DOC is also working with Toitū Te Whenua–Land Information New Zealand on emerging technologies that could support monitoring and measurement. These technologies include remote sensors, genetic technologies, and artificial intelligence.

The changing use of the conservation estate

The department told us it recognises that the incoming Government is interested in seeing more development for economic purposes, and this may include proposals for projects on the conservation estate. It is continuing to process applications for access under current legislation. It noted that proposals for mines may be among projects eligible for the proposed new fast-track regime.[6]

We asked about the status of policy work previously undertaken by the department on the policy of no mines on conservation land. We were told that this had been a priority of the

[6] The Fast-track Approvals Bill was introduced to Parliament on 7 March 2024. It is currently with this committee for consideration.

previous Government but is not a policy of the current Government. That work has now stopped.

DOC noted that the natural resources sector had worked hard to support the development of the Fast-track Approvals Bill, and the department is proud of the work it has contributed to ensure that “there are conservation protections in [the bill]”.

Chateau Tongariro

The department has inherited some costly issues which are not strictly conservation related, and which were not budgeted for. This includes being given responsibility for Chateau Tongariro and the MetService buildings. DOC is currently working to provide options for these heritage buildings to the Minister. It said it is ensuring that a full range of options across the spectrum are considered. These options range from decommissioning buildings to enabling partnerships that would allow these buildings to flourish.

Some of us think management of iconic but ageing buildings such as Chateau Tongariro seems to be outside the department’s conservation mandate. We consider that managing the Chateau requires commercial real estate expertise, which is not necessarily the core expertise of the department. We are concerned that the responsibility DOC has been given for ageing heritage buildings could undermine its genuine tourism role in other areas.

DOC’s responsibility for healthy homes

Many homes that DOC provides to staff, especially in remote areas, have maintenance needs which do not meet healthy homes standards established by the previous Government. Budget 2022 provided $1.5 million to address the greatest building and maintenance concerns. We heard that the increasing costs of building and maintenance, and the remote locations of many of these homes, are proving challenging. We were told that there is more work to do than the department has been funded for.

We asked whether DOC staff themselves had a concern that the homes were unhealthy, or if this was a requirement imposed by external standards. We heard that addressing concerns such as black mould is a priority both for the department and its staff.

Managing concessions

DOC grants concessions, which give permission for a range of activities on public conservation lands and waters. It administers around 7,400 active permissions at any one time. The department acknowledges that the system has been under strain and must improve.

DOC received around 3,000 applications for concessions in 2022/23. At the time of our hearing, it had over 1,000 pending applications. Half had been waiting for more than six months, and 240 had been waiting for over a year.

DOC is working to improve processing times. This includes making the rules clearer for applicants, streamlining processes, and standardising terms and conditions for simpler contracts.

In its briefing to the incoming Minister, DOC indicated that policy change, including potential legislative change, may be needed to fully address issues in its visitor network. This could include reviewing charges both for visitors and concessionaires. However, the department sees an opportunity to improve how the service was delivered ahead of potential policy and revenue changes. It told us concessionaires recognise the need for change, and many had indicated that they want the opportunity to contribute to protecting biodiversity.

Treaty partnerships

The department is responsible for conservation-related redress in more than 60 legislated Treaty settlements. These arrangements include land transfers to iwi, detailed relationship agreements, co-management arrangements, and transferring day-to-day management of significant sites to iwi. We note that DOC told us that they are receivers of obligations negotiated by the Crown and that this imposes financial and other obligations on DOC.

However, relationships with Māori are not limited to Treaty settlements. The Conservation Act 1987 requires the department to give effect to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. This is reflected in DOC's organisational strategy which includes a commitment to being an honourable Treaty partner.

DOC is required to understand the effect of its work and decisions on local Māori interests, priorities, and aspirations. It has a growing range of relationships with whānau, hapū, and iwi, and engagement with pan-Māori groups such as the Iwi Leaders Group. This work programme is overseen by the department's Treaty Relations Group, one of DOC's seven business groups.

Local relationships at place

The department commented on the complexity of its structure and arrangements with numerous Treaty partners. The department has one of the highest numbers of Treaty settlement obligations of any government agency, managing around 3,500 obligations, which includes around 11,000 sub-parts.

DOC reported that in the 2022/23 financial year, through Jobs for Nature, it invested in more than 90 different Māori collective entities to deliver 100 projects across the country. It also supported projects intended to protect the natural integrity of Māori land through the Mātauranga Māori Fund.

We noted that Māori are engaged with a lot of regenerative programmes, including care of the environment. These programmes are based on mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge systems) and happen locally at place, and on a large scale.

We asked whether DOC recognises Treaty relationships as opportunities, rather than just as costs and obligations. We heard that it is continuing to learn what works well in partnerships, and that when this works well there are good outcomes for nature. An example given was the partnership between DOC and Taranaki iwi. DOC rangers and iwi kaitiaki rangers are working as one team, which we were told is producing "incredible conservation outcomes".

DOC said relationships are often already well established on the ground. Regional operational directors and their teams are part of local communities and have enduring relationships. An example given was of the response to Cyclone Gabrielle in February 2023 when DOC staff and local Treaty partners were often among the first responders working to clear marae and other places of significance.

The department acknowledged that the level of relationship and partnership can be more challenging in some places, but that “there are very few places where we wouldn’t be in a room sitting together”. In relationships between DOC and local Māori there is usually a shared sense of mutual obligation to the land.

The department is working to learn from its experiences about what makes good Treaty relationships and to build capability across the whole organisation. It said Treaty relationships cannot be left to the responsibility of one group within the department. We heard that DOC welcomes an upcoming review by the Auditor-General of DOC’s implementation of Treaty settlements.[7]

Te Urewera

We asked about the arrangements in place at Te Urewera, including whether there had been progress on reestablishing the network of huts that had been burned down. DOC noted that Te Urewera is no longer a national park but became its own entity through the Treaty settlement with Tūhoe. The department said the strategic direction is set by Te Urewera Board, which includes both Tūhoe and Crown representatives. Te Urewera Board decided to remove the former DOC huts, and DOC told us the department’s role was to work with Tūhoe on the operational plan to do that. The question of the burning of the huts is currently before the courts.

We asked whether the department is continuing to monitor biodiversity and pest control in Te Urewera. We were told that DOC no longer has the opportunity to do that. Some of us are concerned at the potential implications of DOC no longer monitoring and undertaking pest control.

Work programme

Jobs for Nature

Jobs for Nature has been a $1.219 billion programme to assist economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic through nature-based employment. It began in 2020 as a four-year programme, which has now been extended for a further year. We understand that the programme is now set to close in 2025/26, with most projects reaching completion before that time.[8] It has been administered by several agencies including DOC; the Ministry for the Environment is the lead agency. Through Jobs for Nature, a wide range of groups have:

- treated tens of thousands of hectares of land for predators, plants, and weeds
- created 500km of tracks
- maintained 3,000km of tracks
- undertaken riparian planting of trees in waterways and monitoring of water sites

[7] Controller and Auditor-General, Annual plan 2023/24, p.32, available on the website of the Controller and Auditor-General.

[8] Jobs for Nature | Mahi mō te Taiao Annual Review–Year Three, for the year ended 30 June 2023, p.18, available on the Jobs for Nature website.

- propagated three million plants, with two million of those planted so far.

DOC told us that it was clear to participants from the beginning of the programme that funding would cease at the end of the programme. Contracts with local organisations have included transition arrangements. We heard that a number of programmes have found ways to continue, while others will stop. In one example, a nursery has upskilled several people and is developing into a commercial operation.

The department considers that Jobs for Nature has contributed to creating a skilled conservation workforce. It has also built relationships with iwi and local communities. It said there will be long-lasting benefits from the work that has been undertaken.

Biodiversity

DOC leads the Te Mana o te Taiao–Aotearoa New Zealand Biodiversity Strategy. The department describes its role as leading the collaborative implementation of the strategy and delivering a significant part of it.

Despite all the work being undertaken by the department, in collaboration with many other organisations and groups, it reports that nearly 4,000 native species are either at risk or threatened with extinction. In its briefing to the incoming Minister, DOC advised that only a small proportion of New Zealand's forests are actively managed for predators and weeds. Although 30 percent of New Zealand's plants and animals are found at sea, only 0.4 percent of New Zealand's marine environment is within protected marine reserves.

The department said that, although resources are available showing such things as the threat classification and status of different species, it would like to improve the way it tells the story about New Zealand's species and ecosystems. We heard that people appreciate hearing the good stories, but DOC recognises that it also needs to tell the tougher stories.

We recognise that this is complex work where there is often insufficient information in challenging circumstances. However, some of us noted that there was, at times, a contrast between the department's statements of how many species are at risk, and statements that it does not have enough data and monitoring to understand how many species are at risk.

Support for the Hunting and Fishing portfolio

The department has new responsibilities to support the Minister of Hunting and Fishing with the new hunting and fishing portfolio. It provided a briefing to the incoming Minister in November 2023.[9]

DOC told us it sees opportunities to partner with hunters and hunting organisations, especially around managing introduced species and monitoring pests. It said that initial conversations have indicated that hunting organisations want to understand the effect of their activities on the environment and have an interest in supporting conservation outcomes.

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9 The briefing to the incoming Minister for Hunting and Fishing, November 2023, is available on the website of the Department of Conservation.

We asked whether the department saw potential for tourism within the expanded hunting and fishing portfolio. We were told that the Government has been clear that it wants to consider commercial opportunities, and the department is working to support that.

We asked whether the concession application backlog includes applications for wild animal recovery permits. We were told that a number of these have been issued recently, and that applications are usually cleared within four months. The department later clarified that it has 13 hunting-related concession applications, two of which are more than one year old.

Due to the new priorities of the incoming Government, and to accommodate the new responsibilities of supporting the hunting and fishing portfolio, the department told us it reprioritised its policy work. This has included scaling back some of its policy work on biodiversity and climate change.

Other matters discussed

We also discussed the following matters with DOC. For more detail, refer to the *Hansard* transcript of our hearing, available on the Parliament website.

- **Predator Free New Zealand**
- **Queen Elizabeth II National Trust and other conservation organisations**
- **Staffing matters**—including **DOC staff turnover** and **Support for frontline services**
- **Natural insulation**
- **Avian influenza and other biosecurity threats**
- **Marine mammal strandings**
- **Review of stewardship land**
- **DOC as a voice for the environment.**

Appendix

Committee procedure

We met between 15 February and 28 March 2024 to consider the annual review of the Department of Conservation. We conducted an in-depth annual review, hearing evidence from the department on 7 March 2024 for 3 hours and 11 minutes. We received advice from the Office of the Auditor-General.

Committee members

David MacLeod (Chairperson)
Mike Butterick
Hon Rachel Brooking
Hamish Campbell
Simon Court
Katie Nimon
Lan Pham
Darleen Tana
Hon Dr Megan Woods

Hon Priyanca Radhakrishnan also participated in our consideration of this item of business.

Related resources

We received the following documents as advice and evidence for this annual review. They are available on the Parliament website, along with our structured agenda, and the Hansard transcript and recording of our meeting on 7 March 2024.

- Office of the Auditor-General (Briefing on the Department of Conservation).
- Department of Conservation (Responses to written questions).