



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Petitions Committee

Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Petihana

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Petition of SAFE on behalf of Commissioner for Animals alliance: Establish a Commissioner for Animals

Presented to the House of Representatives
by Greg O'Connor, Chairperson

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Petition of SAFE on behalf of Commissioner for Animals alliance

Recommendation

The Petitions Committee has considered the petition of SAFE on behalf of Commissioner for Animals alliance—Establish a Commissioner for Animals—and recommends to the Government that it investigate how oversight of the animal welfare system could be improved.

Request to establish a Commissioner for Animals

The petition from SAFE on behalf of Commissioner for Animals alliance was signed by two people on the Parliament website. It was presented to the House by Steve Abel on 3 March 2026, and requests:

That the House of Representatives establish a Commissioner for Animals, which reviews the animal welfare system, including regulations; reports on the latest animal welfare science; and provides independent oversight and accountability for animal welfare; and note that 31,565 people have signed a similar online petition.

The Commissioner for Animals alliance comprises over 20 animal protection organisations that came together in 2023 to advocate for the creation of a Commissioner for Animals. They consider that the current system is broken and unable to deliver on the legal protections established for animals in New Zealand.

We sought and received written submissions and held hearings with the petitioner, the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), and the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA).

New Zealand's animal welfare system

New Zealand's animal welfare system is currently provided for under the Animal Welfare Act 1999. The Act was significantly amended in 2015. There are also regulations and codes of welfare that set out specific requirements and provide guidance. MPI told us that, together, these establish a framework of minimum standards for animal welfare outcomes. The New Zealand Animal Welfare Strategy was published in May 2013.

MPI administers the Act and is responsible for leading and facilitating functions of the animal welfare system. These functions include policy development, system oversight, and enforcement. MPI told us that the functions are distributed across multiple business units within MPI to provide a clear separation of roles. It also has an Animal Welfare Steering Committee led by MPI's Deputy Director-General of Agriculture and Investment Services. MPI told us it considers that this internal distribution of functions supports objective decision-making and reduces the risk of conflicts of interest.

MPI and the SPCA are primarily responsible for enforcement, with the two organisations having a memorandum of understanding that sets out how they work together. Each has particular animals and environments it is responsible for.

The National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) and the National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee (NAEAC) are ministerial advisory committees established under the legislation to provide independent advice to the Minister.

The petitioner considers independent oversight is needed

The petition calls on Parliament to create an independent Commissioner for Animals to provide impartial oversight and accountability of New Zealand's animal welfare system. The petitioner said this is based on the principle that laws and systems intended to protect vulnerable groups should have non-partisan oversight, which it says is currently lacking for animals.

The petitioner's submissions give reasons why a commissioner is deemed necessary. Broadly, they cover concerns about conflicts of interest within the existing system structure, a lack of independent oversight, inadequacies in implementation and enforcement processes, and insufficient resourcing of the system. The petitioner considers that, currently, responsibility for animal welfare sits within structures that also hold responsibility for growing agricultural productivity, increasing exports, and supporting industries that profit from the use of animals. The petitioner considers that this leads to conflicts of interest and to animal welfare considerations frequently coming second to industry and economic objectives.

The petitioner considers that much of New Zealand's animal welfare regulatory system is no longer fit for purpose, and that independent oversight of the system is needed to improve transparency, accountability, and effectiveness. The petitioner also observed that animal welfare issues arise across a wide network of legislation and agencies, including resource management, conservation, fisheries, racing, dog control, and local government. The alliance suggested that this fragmentation warrants the establishment of a body with cross-system oversight.

The petitioner noted the 2025 report by the New Zealand Animal Law Association about the establishment of a commissioner role. This document is included in the petitioner's submission.

The petitioner said the remit of a Commissioner for Animals would not replace existing agencies or advisory committees. Instead, a commissioner would fill a gap that currently exists for independent scrutiny of the system. However, it indicated that a wider realignment of system responsibilities could also be an option. It gave the following examples of possible statutory duties and functions of a commissioner:

- act independently on all matters relating to animal welfare while upholding the intention of the Animal Welfare Act
- review the system of agencies and work programmes managing animal welfare, report to the House, and implement improvements to facilitate accountability for animal welfare at all levels
- report to select committees on petitions, bills, and other matters

- provide impartial oversight to ensure the monitoring and enforcement of animal welfare is upheld equally across all industries and trades
- investigate any matter where animal welfare may be or has been adversely affected, advise on preventative measures or remedial action, and report to the House of Representatives
- provide advice to Ministers on appropriate funding thresholds to ensure robust oversight and regulation of animal welfare
- ensure any committee or agency afforded responsibility for animal welfare policy is composed of experts in animal care, behaviour, ethics, policy, and law, without personal or professional conflicts of interest.

In terms of the statutory model that could be used, the petitioner noted the roles of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, the Children's Commissioner, and the Privacy Commissioner. The petitioner acknowledged the financial component of the proposal but considers expenditure on a commissioner justified, saying it would improve the system overall. The petitioner said the future vision would be a Ministry for Animals, but a commissioner would be a practical option.

MPI has confidence in the current system

MPI noted that calls for the creation of a Commissioner for Animals have arisen at various points. It said these calls often reflect concerns about how MPI is managing its role as both the regulator of the animal welfare system and its role as the government department tasked with supporting the growth of the food and fibre sector.

MPI told us it is confident that monitoring, enforcement, and funding of the animal welfare system meet the expectations that the Government and the public have of MPI. It considers that a strength of New Zealand's animal welfare system is that responsibility and oversight are shared across a number of institutions. These include Parliament, Ministers, independent advisory committees, MPI, the SPCA, and the court system. MPI said that public consultations also give New Zealanders a direct voice in the development of animal welfare standards and regulations. MPI considers that, taken together, these create multiple checks, balances, and opportunities for independent challenge.

MPI told us that it has a strong culture of regulatory stewardship and continuous improvement. Its Inspector General Regulatory Systems reports directly to the Director-General, and independently reviews all of MPI's regulatory systems to identify opportunities for improvement. In 2025, the Inspector General conducted a review of the animal welfare regulatory system. The report was published in August 2026.¹

MPI said the regulatory review concluded that the system has served New Zealand well, is built on a solid foundation, and is fundamentally sound. However, the review identified opportunities for improvement in areas such as governance, stakeholder engagement, performance monitoring, and code review processes. MPI told us it has accepted the review's recommendations, and it has an implementation programme under way.

¹ The report is available on [MPI's website](#).

In regard to the petition's request to establish a commissioner role, MPI observed that in considering any potential new oversight mechanism, it is important to distinguish between the following roles as they would affect the cost and complexity of a proposal:

- the setting of animal welfare standards
- independent oversight and scrutiny of the system
- operational enforcement of those standards.

MPI told us that these functions are currently distributed across Parliament, Ministers, the independent advisory committees, MPI, and enforcement agencies. MPI said that the consideration of the costs and benefits of establishing a new entity relative to current system arrangements is a matter for the Government of the day.

The SPCA supports the establishment of a commissioner

The SPCA supports the petition and establishment of a Commissioner for Animals. The SPCA told us that while there are institutions that regulate animal welfare and provide expert advice, New Zealand does not have an independent institution with the job of looking across the whole system, representing animals' interests, and holding the animal welfare system to account.

The SPCA considers that a commissioner would complement, rather than replace, existing institutions. It envisages the role having statutory authority, with powers to publicly report to Parliament, monitor system performance, review standards, and advocate for animals' interests. Unlike existing bodies, the commissioner would not be responsible for developing or implementing policy. The SPCA considers that a commissioner would help to ensure that animal welfare considerations are independently represented at a national level, rather than being embedded within MPI's operational structure.

The SPCA noted its concerns about the current state of the regulatory system. It told us that frontline challenges have become more complex and New Zealand's standards are falling out of date. In the SPCA's view, there is a lack of regulation and minimum standards in some areas that needs attention. It explained how it has endeavoured to support progress on these, and expressed frustration at the lack of progress. It provided four case studies to highlight what it considers are systemic issues. They include delays and lack of clarity in reviewing regulatory processes, ministerial directions altering NAWAC's work programme without notice, lack of progress on updated standards for companion animals as agreed, and the development of pig welfare legislation, which it said did not follow advisory and consultation processes.

Like the petitioner, the SPCA also considers that a commissioner could provide a central point of coordination and oversight across the wider animal welfare system, which is currently fragmented across multiple agencies and sectors. It noted that other agencies such as the Department of Internal Affairs, the Department of Conservation, and Fisheries NZ (within MPI) also have responsibilities relating to animal welfare.

The SPCA considers that the regulatory system review by MPI's Inspector General confirmed the presence of system issues that, in its view, motivated this petition, even though the review did not recommend a commissioner. The SPCA also observed that the scope of the regulatory review did not cover the entirety of the animal welfare system.

Role of existing advisory committees differs from an independent commissioner

As we noted earlier, NAWAC and NAEAC have statutory functions under the Animal Welfare Act to provide advice to the Minister.² Ministerial responsibilities for animal welfare, including legislative changes, are held by Hon Andrew Hoggard, the Associate Minister of Agriculture.

A point of focus for our consideration is whether NAWAC is functioning effectively and how it contributes to the animal welfare system. MPI told us that NAWAC's main role is to develop and recommend codes of welfare and proposals for regulations to the Minister, but that it also provides the Minister with advice on the welfare of animals in New Zealand, animal welfare research needs, legislative proposals, traps and devices, and hunting and killing animals in a wild state.

MPI said that NAWAC and NAEAC provide independent advice to the Minister and, as independent bodies, do not always agree with MPI. However, MPI also told us that Ministers have the ability to set the focus for the committees' work.

The SPCA told us that NAWAC's role is fundamentally different from that of an independent commissioner. The SPCA said that NAWAC provides technical advice on animal welfare standards, and it considers that NAWAC is constrained by its mandate and institutional position. The SPCA noted that NAWAC is reliant on MPI's resourcing and is subject to Ministerial direction through letters of expectation. The SPCA also raised concerns about the Government review of NAWAC that was referred to in 2023 coalition agreements.

We had invited NAWAC to provide a written submission on the petition. NAWAC declined our invitation, telling us it would only make a submission if instructed to do so by the Associate Minister. We wrote to the Associate Minister asking for NAWAC to submit on the petition. The Associate Minister declined our request. He said NAWAC's core functions do not include providing advice to parliamentary committees and that its core role is to provide independent advice to Ministers responsible for animal welfare. He said NAWAC had a full work programme, including work on several production animal codes. He told us that he was mindful of the need to give business certainty and that asking NAWAC to develop a submission would take time away from its core work. He indicated that NAWAC members may have had differing views on the matters raised by the petition, and that it would require significant further deliberation and time for NAWAC to form a collective view.

We are disappointed that the Associate Minister declined our request to ask NAWAC to submit on the petition. We consider that the best way to resolve the concerns that have been raised by submitters about NAWAC's role would have been to hear from NAWAC directly. As noted above, submitters raised concerns about NAWAC's effectiveness and independence. It is difficult for us to form an alternate view without hearing from NAWAC.

Overall, we acknowledge that the current roles of NAWAC and NAEAC are different from that of the proposed Commissioner for Animals.

² NAWAC's functions are set out under section 57 and NAEAC's functions are set out under section 63 of the Animal Welfare Act.

Our response to the petition

We thank the petitioner for bringing the petition to Parliament. We also thank MPI and the SPCA for their submissions. We appreciate the work of all those who support the welfare of animals across New Zealand in different roles and capacities.

We acknowledge the concerns of the petitioner and signatories about the current structure and performance of the animal welfare system in New Zealand, and their call for creating more independent oversight of it. We observe that MPI and the SPCA, which both carry out enforcement duties, appear to have differing views on how well the system is working and whether future plans for improvements are sufficient.

The majority of us are not convinced at this time that a Commissioner for Animals, as put forward by the petitioner, is necessarily the best solution to address these concerns. A wide variety of possibilities for the exact structure, duties, and functions would need to be considered if such a role were to be established.

However, we were limited in our consideration of the petition as we did not hear from NAWAC. Therefore, we are not able to express confidence that the work of NAWAC will address the concerns of the petitioner.

We consider that the concerns about system issues that have been raised with us through this petition need to be examined further and addressed. To this end, we recommend that the Government investigate how oversight of the animal welfare system could be improved. This could include identifying ways that better provide for formal and appropriately resourced independent avenues within the system to advocate for animals, raise awareness, and facilitate accountability to Parliament.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was signed by two people on the Parliament website. It was presented to the House by Steve Abel on 3 March 2026 and referred to us that day. We met between 23 April 2026 and 17 September 2026 to consider it. We received written submissions and heard oral evidence from SAFE (as petitioner), the Ministry for Primary Industries, and the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA).

Committee members

Greg O'Connor (Chairperson)
Hon Andrew Bayly (from 1 July 2026)
Greg Fleming
Paulo Garcia (until 1 July 2026)
Celia Wade-Brown

Steve Abel participated in some of our work on this petition.

Related resources

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on the [Parliament website](#).

A recording of our hearings can be [accessed online](#).