



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Petitions Committee

Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Petihana

54th Parliament

March 2025

**Petition of Erin Tiplady on behalf of
Northcote Intermediate School Room 3:
Survey the RMS *Niagara* to find out exactly
how much oil is still on board**

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

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Petition of Erin Tiplady on behalf of Northcote Intermediate School Room 3

Recommendation

The Petitions Committee has considered the petition of Erin Tiplady on behalf of Northcote Intermediate School Room 3—Survey the RMS *Niagara* to find out exactly how much oil is still on board—and recommends to the Government that Maritime New Zealand prioritise a survey and risk assessment of the RMS *Niagara*.

Request to survey the RMS *Niagara*

The petition was presented to the House on 22 May 2024. It requests:

That the House of Representatives urge the Government to thoroughly inspect and survey the wreck of the RMS *Niagara* in the Hauraki Gulf for any oil that should be removed from it.

About the RMS *Niagara*

The RMS *Niagara* is a World War II shipwreck in the sea north of the Hauraki Gulf. In June 1940, it sailed from Auckland and hit a sea mine laid by a German cruiser. The ship was carrying 590 gold ingots to the United States as payment for military supplies, 585 of which have been recovered.

The ship was also carrying an unknown amount of fuel oil. It had the capacity to carry up to 4,324 tons of oil. Some was lost when the ship sank. Over the years, oil has been observed on the surface of the sea near the wreck and reported to authorities.

Comments from the petitioner

The petitioner, Erin Tiplady, is a teacher who lodged the petition on behalf of her class, Room 3, at Northcote Intermediate School.

We received written and oral submissions from students in her class. They told us that the RMS *Niagara* has been at the bottom of the Hauraki Gulf for 84 years and has been leaking oil throughout that time. The students believe there is still a lot of oil in the ship. They said there have been many reports of oil on the surface of the water and of residents smelling oil, which they told us is not good enough. They said this is extremely bad for the moana (sea) and all the life around it. The students are concerned that the ship may break up and spill the remaining oil.

The students said that the Hauraki Gulf is worth billions of dollars to the New Zealand economy but that, if a major oil spill occurs there, “it will be worthless and cost even more in a clean-up”. They said if the oil on the ship leaks, it would spread through the harbour and local beaches. They told us it is a “ticking time bomb” and that if there is a large oil spill, they would never be able to swim at the beaches again. They were also concerned for bird and marine life in the area, especially that some species native to New Zealand could become

extinct if a major spill occurred. They were concerned that if that happened, younger generations could grow up without experiencing important aspects of New Zealand life.

The students said that they believe New Zealand has the resources to investigate how much oil is left on board. They suggested that an investigation could also find the five remaining gold ingots, which could help to pay for the clean-up.

Comments from the Mangawhai Museum

The Mangawhai Museum has helped Northcote Intermediate School students learn about the RMS *Niagara*. Angela Cook, the museum manager, wrote a submission in support of the petition. She told us that people visiting the museum are surprised and horrified to learn that the shipwreck has not been drained of oil.

Ms Cook said that all of New Zealand's moana is beautiful but that the islands and coastline near the site of the shipwreck are home to manu (birds) not found anywhere else. She said thousands of hours have been spent by volunteers working to protect the tara iti (fairy tern), which could be put at risk by an oil spill. As New Zealand approaches the 85th anniversary of the RMS *Niagara*'s sinking, she told us that, to protect the New Zealand environment, it is the right time to review decisions about the shipwreck.

Comments from Maritime New Zealand

Maritime New Zealand is the lead agency that deals with wrecks and oil spills. It told us it is aware of ongoing public interest in the RMS *Niagara*. It receives updates on the vessel and the area around it. It also meets with stakeholders, undertakes community engagement, and provides operational information and recommendations to the Government.

Maritime New Zealand's website indicates that it has twice asked the Government for funding to survey the RMS *Niagara*, but these proposals have not been successful.¹ Maritime New Zealand told us that any future work on the shipwreck will require Government funding.

Comments from the Department of Conservation

The Department of Conservation (DOC) supports the petitioner's request for an investigation to find out how much oil is still on the RMS *Niagara*. It told us this would be a pragmatic step forward. It welcomed the environmental action by the Northcote Intermediate students, and the support of their teacher.

DOC understands that there is uncertainty about the likelihood of a significant oil spill from the wreck, because there is no firm information about how much oil remains in the ship's hold. It said the effect of any potential oil spill is also uncertain because it would depend on how much oil is released, the condition of the oil, how quickly any spill is detected and responded to, the weather conditions, and the time of year. However, it said it is concerned about the potential scenarios for a spill.

¹ More information about the RMS *Niagara* is available on the [Maritime New Zealand website](#).

DOC said that an independent stakeholder working group recommended in 2017 that an assessment be undertaken of the risk posed by the wreck.² DOC supported Maritime New Zealand's two unsuccessful applications to the Government in 2019 and 2020 for funding for a survey and risk assessment of the wreck. DOC told us it would support a further Budget proposal by Marine New Zealand to fund an investigation.

The Hauraki Gulf Marine Park and a significant number of island sanctuaries and marine reserves are in the vicinity of the wreck of the RMS *Niagara*. DOC said a large spill could seriously affect many threatened and protected species. It told us that even the release of a relatively small amount of oil could affect the environment.

DOC said that 27 species of sea birds breed in the area most likely to be affected by an oil spill. For five of those species, the entire population breeds in the area. These five species are the:

- Buller's shearwater
- New Zealand fairy tern
- Pycroft's petrel
- tāiko / black petrel
- New Zealand storm petrel.

We were told that other marine species in the area which could be affected by an oil spill include the:

- oceanic mantra ray
- New Zealand fur seal
- orca / killer whale
- common dolphin
- bottlenose dolphin
- Bryde's whale.

Comments from the Northland Regional Council

The wreck of the RMS *Niagara* is within the jurisdiction of the Auckland Council, but the Northland Regional Council said it recognises that any oil spills could affect the Northland coastline.

The regional council said no one knows how much oil is still on the vessel. It said it is a heavy fuel which has semi-solidified because of the sea depth and temperature. We were told that oil slicks over the wreck have been recorded frequently, especially during the summer when water temperatures are higher and the heavy fuel oil is more fluid. The regional council supports any investigations or surveys that would provide more information on the state of the vessel and the quantity of oil remaining.

² The independent stakeholder working group produced the Sea Change – Tai Timu Tai Pari Marine Spatial Plan. It is available on the [Auckland Council website](#).

Our response to the petition

We thank the petitioner, Erin Tiplady, and the students in Room 3 of Northcote Intermediate School for bringing this petition to Parliament. We especially thank Maddie, Matilda, and Holly for their written and oral submissions on behalf of their classmates. They are articulate and passionate advocates for the environment. We were moved by their hope that other children will be able to grow up enjoying the beaches and harbour that they love.

We agree that New Zealanders deserve to know whether the quantity of fuel oil remaining on the shipwreck poses a risk to the environment. We recognise that an oil spill could potentially affect iconic and valued species, oceans, and coastlines.

We acknowledge the financial constraints every Government operates under. However, risk management depends on having accurate information so that decision makers can assess and prioritise risks and develop appropriate strategies to minimise or mitigate them. We recommend to the Government that Maritime New Zealand prioritise a survey and risk assessment of the RMS *Niagara*.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was referred to us on 24 May 2024. We met between 22 August 2024 and 13 March 2025 to consider it. We received written submissions from the petitioner, Angela Cook (Mangawhai Museum), Maritime New Zealand, the Department of Conservation, and Northland Regional Council, and heard oral evidence from the petitioner.

Committee members

Greg O'Connor (Chairperson)
Carl Bates (to 29 January 2025)
Kahurangi Carter (from 29 January 2025)
Greg Fleming
Paulo Garcia (from 29 January 2025)
Francisco Hernandez (to 29 January 2025)

Related resources

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

A recording of our hearing can be accessed online [on the Parliament website](#).