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Media Release: EDS calls on government to reconsider Auckland tree protection approach

EDS is concerned that Auckland is losing its urban forest. Recent research by the University of Auckland has shown that trees in central Auckland are being cut down because of repeated RMA reforms.

“While other cities have targets of achieving 40% tree cover or more, Auckland is moving backwards with a minimalist approach reliant on a cumbersome and costly scheduling process,” said EDS’s Senior Policy Analyst, Dr Marie Brown.

“Since 2008, tree protection rules have been progressively eroded by central government, an effect exacerbated by Auckland Council’s lack of willingness to ‘hold the line’ on what it is able to protect. Other cities and regions around the country have similarly weak provisions, leading to rapid loss of urban forest nationally. Just 6% remains in Auckland.

“The Proposed Auckland Unitary Plan provides little hope that the imbalance can or will be corrected. EDS, in association with Forest and Bird and the Tree Council, has proposed a second-tier schedule that would enable trees which merit protection but do not yet qualify for “notable” scheduling to be protected in the interim.

“EDS is of the view that when the government wound back tree protection, it got it badly wrong. Auckland is under extreme development pressure, and a robust and innovative combination of regulatory and economic tools is needed to safeguard the urban forest.

“The upcoming RMA reforms are an opportunity to address this, and reintroduce carefully calibrated regulatory measures to enable more effective protection of the urban forest. EDS will advocate strongly for this fresh approach.

“The government and council need to fully acknowledge the wider benefits to the community which trees provide and find ways to better protect the urban forest through a combination of regulatory and economic tools.

“Trees are crucial from an ecological standpoint, providing biodiversity and landscape benefits. Urban areas are also home to some 87% of New Zealand’s population, and urban forest is the primary contact with nature than many city-dwellers have.

“A key challenge in the longer term is to also better recognise the costs borne by the property owners who retain trees. We need stronger incentives for landowners to retain trees on their land. At present the costs of retaining trees on private land are concentrated with the landowner, as are the benefits of removal.

“Smart development can incorporate trees and other natural features. Addressing Auckland’s housing shortage should not be done at the expense of the trees of Auckland. Creating an urban desert will not get us closer to being a world class city,” said Dr Brown.

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