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Media Release

Submissions due on Resource Management Reform Bill

The Environmental Defence Society has prepared a draft submission on the Resource Management Reform Bill and has made this available on its website to assist individuals and groups who wish to prepare a submission and to get feedback from interested parties.

“The Bill places unreasonable restrictions on Councils that want to protect significant urban trees. The Bill overrules a 2011 Environment Court decision. It requires tree protection rules in plans to identify individual trees or a cluster, grove, or line of trees by street address or legal description of the land,” said EDS Chairman Gary Taylor.

“This is imposing a massively bureaucratic responsibility on Councils and not all of them will have the capacity to carry out this exercise. It makes it very hard to protect trees.

“Eighty seven percent of New Zealanders live in towns and cities and trees contribute significantly to amenity values in the urban environment. The proposed amendments would be a step towards a future of more barren, lifeless cities.

“The Government is pandering to the vested interests and extreme views of the Property Council, which has been running an anti-trees campaign, and has not considered the benefits balanced tree protection offers to the wider community.

“In an effort to make tree protection more straight-forward, EDS has developed a compromise which may be more palatable to the Government. We welcome any feedback on that drafting before finalising our submission.

“The Bill also contains substantive changes to the cost-benefit analysis of planning documents.

“The proposed changes to section 32 emphasise economic development, including a specific requirement to identify and assess the effects on economic growth and employment. This places undue weight on economic values at the expense of the environment.

“Strengthening capacity, capability and resourcing are more likely to improve section 32 reports than the proposed legislative changes.

“The Resource Management Reform Bill also deals with the creation of the Auckland Unitary Plan. The process was well signalled and is generally supported by EDS but as drafted it contains some crucial weaknesses.

“The Government could make changes to the process by regulation, including allowing the Hearing Panel to ignore any part of the RMA or National Policy Statements. This is clearly inappropriate and constitutionally obnoxious.

“The decision of the Hearing Panel would not be limited by the scope of submissions made to it. This would allow the Hearing Panel to make a decision on which it had not heard any evidence and if it was accepted by the Council, the decision could not be appealed.

“We are also concerned about the suggestion that Ministers would appoint the Hearing Panel. Auckland Council should appoint the Panel, not Ministers, since it is Auckland’s plan and ratepayers are meeting all the costs. We are concerned that the Government might appoint Hearing Panel members who support its own agenda.

“Submissions on the Bill are due on the 28th of February,” Mr Taylor concluded.