



Rationale for the establishment of Freshwater Management Units (FMU's) for water quality in Northland

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Background

The National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020, or NPS-FM, directs regional councils to identify freshwater management units that include all freshwater bodies within its region.

A freshwater management unit (FMU) is defined in the NPS-FM as “all or any part of a water body or water bodies and their related catchments, that a regional council determines under clause 3.8 (in the NPS-FM) is an appropriate unit for freshwater management and accounting purposes, and part of an FMU means any part of an FMU including, but not limited to, a specific site, river reach, water body, or part of a water body.”

While having no official status and not constituting legal advice, the Ministry for the Environment’s Guide to Identifying Freshwater Management Units states:¹

The concept of FMUs was added to the NPS-FM [in 2014] following recommendations by the Land and Water Forum to:

- *encourage a pragmatic approach to freshwater management by allowing water bodies to be grouped together where appropriate;*
- *allow a single objective to apply to freshwater bodies that are not connected; and*
- *establish a spatial scale at which management activities are undertaken, including freshwater accounting and setting freshwater objectives and limits.*

The definition of FMUs is intentionally flexible so councils can determine the spatial scale best suited to managing fresh water in the specific circumstances of their region. Management includes setting values, objectives, limits, and undertaking freshwater accounting and monitoring. The use of spatial units in land and water planning is not a new concept for councils, as this approach is already used by councils for water allocation. Incorporating FMUs into the NPS-FM formalises the concept and attaches specific obligations to it.

An FMU may be made up of a group of water bodies that are similar, both physically and/or socially (e.g. who uses them and for what). Similar freshwater bodies can be grouped (e.g. all first order streams originating from a mountain range) and be effectively managed as one FMU. Alternatively, an individual freshwater body or a part of a freshwater body (e.g. a reach or sections of a river) could be set as an FMU. Management can be applied to whole FMU’s, parts of FMU’s, or multiple FMU’s.

Council has established FMU’s for the purposes of managing water quantity in the regional plan for Northland – the basis for these is set out in the accompanying Section

¹ Ministry for the Environment. 2016. A Guide to Identifying Freshwater Management Units under the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2014. Wellington: Ministry for the Environment.

32 evaluation (section 5.2)² – essentially, the water quantity FMU's group waterbodies by values and characteristics rather than on a catchment basis.

This document sets out the basis for water quality FMU's where a different approach is used.

Rationale

Using this guidance, Northland's water quality FMU's were developed based on the following rationale:

- given the strong link between catchment surface water quality and receiving environments such as estuaries/harbours, the majority of FMU boundaries are defined by major harbour catchments (Figure 1),
- the FMU's align with the NPS-FM requirement to manage freshwater in an integrated way, and on a whole-of-catchment basis that can consider effects on receiving environments (such as harbours and estuaries),
- harbour based / sea draining FMU's reflect the area of land with a strong 'cause and effect' relationship between surface water quality and receiving environments,
- the FMU's are a suitable size for identifying outcomes for freshwater, managing effects on values and accounting for water quality,
- harbour based FMU's generally align with communities of interest and is a pragmatic and coherent approach for Northland,
- all the FMUs include river and / or lake monitoring sites that can be used to track progress towards freshwater outcomes,

identify any degradation and inform NPS-FM reporting requirements,

- FMU's without major harbours (such as Pouto and Whananaki Coast) group waterbodies that have similar characteristics (e.g. dune lakes or hydrologically unconnected rivers / streams that drain to the open coast), and
- the large Northern Wairoa FMU includes the component of the Kaipara catchment that falls within the Northland region. This boundary is appropriate as the entire Kaipara catchment (managed by both Northland Regional Council and Auckland Council) is covered under the Kaipara Moana Remediation Programme aimed at halting degradation of the Kaipara harbour.

These FMU boundaries were approved by the Northland Regional Council on 20 August 2019.

²<https://www.nrc.govt.nz/media/xhdfzb3r/section32proposedregionalplanseptember2017finalweb.pdf>

Figure 1: Northland Water Quality FMU's



Northland Regional Council

P 0800 002 004

E info@nrc.govt.nz

W www.nrc.govt.nz