

Protecting biodiversity on private land: Auckland Council enabling covenant owners to improve their backyard biodiversity.

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There are over six thousand statutory covenants in the Auckland Region, a large proportion of which are defined as Significant Ecological Areas under Auckland's Proposed Unitary Plan.

While statutory covenants in the Auckland context are usually small, fragmented patches of indigenous forest or wetland, collectively they form a substantial network of protected biodiversity across the landscape.

Auckland's statutory covenants (between the Council and private landowner) are usually created in exchange for the right to subdivide a property or as a result of development, this number therefore continues to grow each year (along with Auckland's rapidly growing population!). Under these statutory covenants, landowners have obligations to manage the covenant in perpetuity, which most often includes maintaining stock fencing and regular weed and pest animal control.

For the past four years the Auckland Council Biodiversity team has run a targeted engagement programme to help covenant owners in a positive, proactive way to ensure the intended biodiversity outcomes are being met. Graduate ecologists are employed each summer to engage with covenant owners and provide them with biodiversity management advice tailored to their property.

Between 2012 and 2016 graduate ecologists engaged with over six hundred covenant owners across the Auckland region. A rapid ecological assessment was completed at each site which was converted into a helpful 'Covenant Action Plan' for the landowner. A simple "traffic light system" was also used to classify overall covenant health, taking into account biosecurity threats and compliance with covenant conditions. Follow up audits of sites has shown an increase in landowner action, improvement in covenant health, and a wider appreciation of Auckland's backyard biodiversity in general.

This presentation will demonstrate how a proactive, friendly and enabling approach is helping private landowners to effectively look after biodiversity on their land.