

Transformational joint venture to restore Waihi Estuary

Wednesday 21 June 2023

Toi Moana Bay of Plenty Regional Council and iwi collective Te Wahapū o Waihi have partnered to return 30ha of low-lying farmland to coastal wetland in an effort to improve the ecological health of Waihi Estuary.

This significant collaborative project, and the shared aspiration to return mauri to the Waihi Estuary, was acknowledged yesterday with both groups coming together to karakia onsite.

The new wetland will be developed between the Pongakawa River and Pukehina Canal, on the margins of the Waihi Estuary. It will play a critical role in helping to treat agricultural drainage water from the adjacent dairy farms, to help improve the estuary's health; improve indigenous wetland habitat and biodiversity. Coastal wetlands can also store significant amounts of carbon, known as Blue Carbon, so this project helps to contribute to our climate efforts.

Pim De Monchy, Bay of Plenty Regional Council Coastal Catchments Manager says the farm purchase is one of several ambitious programmes of work that Council is undertaking in collaboration with Te Wahapū o Waihi.

“We value the deep cultural connection tangata whenua have to the land, and recognise the strength that their knowledge holds in environmental conservation and restoration.

“Wetlands play a crucial role in water filtration, flood prevention and biodiversity conservation, making this restoration project an important step towards bringing life back to the estuary.”

Mr de Monchy also acknowledged the key role of neighbouring farmers in making this deal possible, and the Ministry for the Environment as a co-funder of the land acquisition.

The Waihi Estuary has been identified as one of the most degraded in the country, due to decades of wetland drainage, river channelisation, land use change and contaminated runoff throughout the 35,000-hectare catchment. To return the estuary to a moderate state of ecological health, significant change is required.

Kura Paul-Burke, Te Wahapū o Waihi Project Lead, says, “We compare the health of the estuary with the health of our people and unfortunately, the Waihi estuary is in an alarming state.

“As kaitiaki, it's our responsibility to look after our taiao. If we want the estuary to be the abundant mahinga kai, or food basket, it once was, action is needed now.”

Te Taru White, Bay of Plenty Regional Councillor and Independent Chair of Te Wahapū o Waihi, has been involved in the project from the beginning.

“It is fitting that as Matariki rises, and we welcome the new year full of possibilities, that we embark on this new joint venture full of aspiration for the future of the Waihi Estuary. Whatungarongaro te tangata, toitū te whenua – long after we move on, the land will remain.

“Te Wahapū o Waihi is a collective of five iwi from across the Waihi Estuary catchment area. This strong relationship further supports the work that will need to be done beyond this wetland project.”

To achieve this unique project, 109 hectares of land was initially purchased on Cutwater Road, Pukehina, with 79 hectares on sold to a neighbouring farm. The remaining 30 hectares will be returned to coastal wetland. This project has been funded 50% by Regional Council and 50% from Te Wahapū o Waihi through the Ministry for the Environment's Freshwater Improvement Fund.

For more information about the Waihi estuary: www.boprc.govt.nz/waihi-estuary-catchment
More information on Te Wahapū o Waihi: www.waihi-estuary.iwi.nz

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Sun rising over the recently purchased farm land on the edges of the Waihi Estuary



Marking the special occasion onsite on Tuesday with those involved in the project

