

Significant Natural Areas in the Far North

The Far North is home to a range of unique landscapes, species and habitats, many of which are under threat. The Council is required to identify these habitats and protect them from adverse impacts through the District Plan. Last year we collaborated with the other Northland Councils on a project to map and identify Significant Natural Areas (SNAs) within the District. The new mapping has increased the accuracy and knowledge of natural areas in the Far North.

The mapping has been done by consultant ecologists, Wildland Consultants using existing literature, inspection of new aerial photography and some site visits. The mapped SNAs are included in the Draft Proposed District Plan which will be released on 1 March 2021.

There are currently rules in the Operative District Plan for vegetation clearance and methods for managing Significant Natural Areas. There will be new rules in the Proposed District Plan for activities within SNAs including for vegetation clearance, earthworks and subdivision in these areas.

You are receiving this letter because a Significant Natural Area has been identified on your property. We have enclosed an ecological report which details the flora and fauna found in your SNA. Please note that the report covers the whole SNA - which may overlap with a neighbouring property - and therefore all species listed in the report may not be found on your property.

The inclusion of Significant Natural Areas in the new District Plan is a requirement under the Regional Policy Statement for Northland. It is also likely to be required under the National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity, which is scheduled to be released in April 2021.

What is a Significant Natural Area?

A Significant Natural Area is an area of indigenous biodiversity that has been identified as having high ecological value using a set of criteria. The criteria are based on Appendix 5 of the Northland Regional Policy Statement; and includes: Representativeness, Rarity/distinctiveness, Diversity and pattern, and Ecological context

How many SNAs are in the Far North District?

A total of 685 Significant Natural Areas have been identified by Wildlands Consultants. This covers 282,696 hectares, which equates to approximately 42% of the area of the Far North District.

Why is Council mapping Significant Natural Areas?

Council currently uses Department of Conservation Protected Natural Areas Programme maps. These maps have not been updated since the 1900s. Council is required by Northland's Regional Policy Statement to identify Significant Natural Areas. Council also has a responsibility under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) to protect areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous flora as a matter of national importance.

Why do we need SNAs?

Aotearoa New Zealand has a unique natural heritage due to its geographic isolation and geological instability. This means that our ecology includes a high level of endemism (species found only in New Zealand), and highly distinct and significant ecosystems. New Zealand's biodiversity is in decline and faces challenges due to the way that we use natural resources. Protecting our indigenous biodiversity means that Aotearoa's natural resources will be protected for future generations.

I have an SNA on my property. What does that mean I can and can't do?

If you are not planning on developing your land, then an SNA on your land means business as usual. However, the proposed District Plan will have requirements around SNAs in terms of vegetation clearance and protection through the subdivision process. This means that you may need to apply for a resource consent if you are planning on clearing vegetation or establishing new uses of the land within the SNA.

Will having an SNA on my property affect what I currently use my land for?

No. Existing uses on your property will not be affected by the SNA. The SNA maps have not included residential units (houses) or other buildings on or near in SNAs. Requirements around protecting SNAs will ~~only~~ be triggered through resource consents under the proposed District Plan.

How is this different to the operative District Plan?

The current plan covers this topic under two chapters:

- Rules around vegetation clearance are covered in Land Use Chapter 12.2. The criteria relate to the amount of vegetation to be cleared, and the age of trees. The rules are relatively permissive, and a resource consent is only required for large tracts of clearance.
- The other relevant chapter is Chapter 13 on Subdivision refers to the DOC Protected Natural Areas maps as an assessment criterion for subdivision when considering the question of what the effects of subdivision will be on indigenous flora and fauna. The new Indigenous Biodiversity chapter will refer directly to the SNA maps, which themselves are contained within the plan.

Will I be required to fence or formally protect the SNA on my property?

No. If you are not planning on developing or subdividing your property, there will be no requirement to formally protect the SNA through fencing, covenants or other methods. However, the proposed District Plan will have landuse and subdivision rules associated with SNAs which may require you to protect the SNA if you are planning on developing the land or clearing vegetation. As well as this, there may be options for you to voluntarily protect the SNA formally, either through a Council conservation covenant or a private covenant (i.e QEII).

Will I be compensated for having an SNA on my property?

Not directly, no. However, there are a number of schemes which may incentivise protection; including rates remission for conservation covenants which are voluntarily put on natural areas with ecological values. More information on conservation covenants is available here: <https://www.fndc.govt.nz/District-Plan/Conservation-covenants>

Does this affect the ownership of my land?

No. Having a Significant Natural Area identified on your property will have no affect on land ownership. Council is required to identify Significant Natural Areas to be in line with the Regional Policy Statement.