

Trouble down on the landfarm

Forest & Bird is concerned about the controversial practice of landfarming in South Taranaki. By **Catherine Cheung**.

Forest & Bird has objected to a district council's proposal that landfarming – the spreading of petroleum wastes on farms – be a “permitted” activity in the rural zone.

At the public hearings on the proposed South Taranaki District Plan in late June, Forest & Bird suggested that it should be at least “restricted discretionary”.

Taranaki is currently the only place in New Zealand to allow “landfarming”, where waste from oil and gas drilling is spread on the soil. The area is heavily disturbed by the process, with topsoil scraped off, wastes spread, topsoil returned, then fertilised and sown with grass or crop for livestock.

Although the government and industry claim the practice is safe, in 2013, Fonterra refused to take milk from new landfarms. And in 2014, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment made her concerns about the practice known.

Forest & Bird is worried about the effect of petroleum waste on the health of local waterways and wants to see more regulation and monitoring of their effects.

General Counsel Peter Anderson said: “Forest & Bird opposes spreading hydrocarbons over land due to the harm that the possible leaching of petroleum waste could do to waterways. These effects have not been considered adequately, particularly in the porous coastal environment where it may compromise aquatic biodiversity.

“Current landfarming practices demonstrate a lack of adequate regulation and monitoring. The long-term impact on soil resilience and the potential use of these areas for farming or other activities in the future has not been adequately assessed.”

Other submitters were also concerned. Climate Justice Taranaki pointed out that eight landfarms are located within South Taranaki's sandy coastal environment, three of which were consented since 2009, after the designation of the Coastal Protection Area in 2004.

The proposed district plan has halved the total extent of the Coastal Protection Area to just over 5000ha. Six landfarms are now (entirely or largely) outside the Coastal Protection Area as a result of its inland boundary being moved to just 100m from cliff tops along the coastal edge.

The council's rationale behind the excision of part of one landfarm (pictured right) was that the coastal environment has been “extensively modified by consented land farming and no longer reflects significant coastal process, influences and qualities apparent in adjoining dune areas”.

But Forest & Bird lawyer Ruby Haazen said the effect of changing the boundary would be significant because the landfarm would no longer be subject to the stricter rules of the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement.

This post-hoc planning approach is counter to the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement under the Resource



One of ten landfarms in Taranaki. Photo: Climate Justice Taranaki

Management Act, which requires councils to adopt a precautionary approach to use and management of coastal resources potentially vulnerable to effects from climate change, preserve and protect the natural character of the coastal environment, and restore or rehabilitate degraded or contaminated areas. Taranaki Energy Watch is preparing to legally challenge the proposed district plan on this and other grounds.

There are eight landfarms in South Taranaki and two in New Plymouth district, which also has two worm composting sites that take petroleum wastes.

Taranaki Regional Council is responsible for monitoring the discharge activities and effects of all landfarms.

But landfarms don't have to be mapped or registered as contaminated on the Hazardous Activities and Industries List (HAIL) held by the regional council.

