



New Zealand Psychological Society Submission to the Environment Select Committee - on the Fast Track Approvals Amendment Bill

Introduction

The New Zealand Psychological Society (NZPsS)

As the country faces the ongoing challenges of a turbulent climate, the NZPsS, as a professional body, is highly conscious of our responsibilities to the health and wellbeing of clients, families, communities, and current and future generations. We have joined with other organisations in New Zealand, the wider Pacific region, and globally to address psychology's role in environmental challenges and the consequences of climate change.

The proposed amendments to the Fast Track Approvals Act create the conditions for 'exploitative processes' and exacerbate negative impacts for people, communities, and the physical environment. It also exacerbates competition for resources and wealth, driving inequities, undermining the 'common good', and benefiting a privileged few.

Our response is guided by the **NZ Psychological Society's Strategic Plan**¹ and the **Code of Ethics for Psychologists Practising in Aotearoa New Zealand**².

The NZPsS Strategic Plan includes the following relevant goals:

- "advocacy for social and environmental wellbeing and justice"
- "(Taking) a Tiriti-informed approach to respond to the need for urgent action on Climate and Social Issues and their impacts"

The Code of Ethics includes Principle 4 of *Social Justice and Responsibility to Society*:

- "addressing and challenging unjust societal norms and behaviours that disempower people at all levels of interaction"

In summary, the Fast Track Approvals Amendment Bill should be rejected in its entirety.

¹ Strategic Plan of the New Zealand Psychological Society NZPsS Strategic Plan 2022-2027

² Code of Ethics for Psychologists Working in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Key Concerns regarding the proposed amendments:

1. *Removal of requirement to consult, and instead only notify:*

Clause 6 – Amendment to Section 11 removes the only opportunity for those who will need to live with the impact of the project to be properly consulted. Whilst there are opportunities to ‘comment’ later in the process this does not equal a requirement to consult with affected parties. With the stated intent of the Act to facilitate a “Fast Track” process it is counterproductive to wait until the process is nearly complete to seek the input of those most affected by the project. Efficiency is best served by hearing all of the concerns and potential issues at the beginning – ensuring that these can be taken into account before the application is completed. This includes iwi, hapū, councils, community groups and environmental organisations.

Denial of public access to and input on decisions that affect them or their interests (for example a holiday home or fishing or recreational areas) creates disaffection and alienation from the process that can lead to a sense of powerlessness and helplessness in the face of government imposing its power upon them. Helplessness is a well-researched topic in psychology, being seen as a major factor in people’s loss of a sense of control, increased uncertainty and lower self-efficacy. These are powerful features that impact on mental health and the deliberate imposition of these is reckless.

Preventing meaningful engagement in planning decisions has the effect of suppressing well-being and producing depression, anxiety and anger and those affected, their families, their communities, and their affected businesses.

2. *Ministerial Policy Statements*

The enabling of Government Policy Statements, with a requirement that these be considered as significant factors in any decisions of the panel and EPA creates potential for significant conflicts of interest.

This risks further undermining the trust of the public in its government.

The addition of Section 10A puts a focus on political influence in decisions that should be made based on the scientific evidence available. This also increases the likely power and influence of lobbyists in these decisions through donations to political parties.

3. *Timing of Panel Decisions*

It is appropriate to leave the decision regarding the amount of time needed for proper consideration of the application to the discretion of the panel convenor. Some projects are significant and complex and are likely to require more than 60 days. These decisions

should not be required to fit into an arbitrary, pre-determined time frame.

The potential impacts of these amendments on Psychological Wellbeing

In a briefing paper on the implications of the original Fast Track Approvals Act for public health, Prickett et al (2024) have observed that human health is intrinsically linked to environmental health and the effects of the Bill in circumventing public consultation processes and current environmental protections include increased greenhouse gas emissions and deterioration of human and natural environments.

The proposed amendments are contrary to the principles of justice that provide for people's engagement in matters that affect them and proper scrutiny of plans by experts, stakeholders and the public. This is a recipe for damaging psychological effects to occur in affected communities both immediate and in the longer term.

We know, for instance, that industrial resource developments that have physical impacts on Indigenous lands and territories, change access to land-based activities, or result in community displacement may serve as a unique pathway for mental health risks and outcomes in Indigenous communities (Burns et al. 2022). In a systematic review of research across a number of countries (including Aotearoa New Zealand), researchers have reported that “overall, studies showed that Indigenous Peoples experienced negative mental health impacts after land dispossession due to the development of industrial resource extraction projects on Indigenous lands, regardless of how geographically close they were to the industrial site.” (Morton Ninomiya, 2023).

Once approved, such projects and the ongoing effects do not simply go away so the effect of such decision-making is prolonged, possibly permanent. Destruction of people's social and natural environments is a major cause of distress with negative effects on mental health and well-being (Rafa et al, 2025). The avoidance of important social, environmental and cultural considerations and the absence of appropriate and necessary conditions on the projects will likely result in public reaction and unrest. The government needs to take heed of the unpredictability of people's individual and collective reactions when their communities are affected by unfair decisions. The warning is well-founded and research (e.g. Poulos & Haddad, 2016) would indicate that the targets of disruptive activity (and potentially violence by or directed at protesters) could be the projects, the workers, beneficiary shareholders, supporting businesses, and the decision-makers themselves. This is not a pathway responsible social commentators would recommend to the government. Electorate MPs, particularly in those areas directly affected by projects, might well expect action within their electorates where people's homes and favourite recreation areas are affected.

Recommendations

The Fast Track Approvals Amendment bill should be emphatically rejected by the Select

Committee. We also oppose any retrospective application of any amendments that are made.

We recommend that the Government require that projects submitted to the Fast Track process and other decision-making processes are subjected to adequate expert involvement - including iwi representatives - in design and assessment of the projects.

We would recommend that the government focus on systems that include fair access and involvement in these decisions to the public, are open and transparent, involve appropriate expertise and are genuinely aimed at ensuring wellbeing for people, community and the natural environment.

Relevant References

Burns, N., Linton, J., Pollock, N.J. et al. Impact on mental health and wellbeing in Indigenous communities due to land loss resulting from industrial resource development: protocol for a systematic review. *Syst Rev* 11, 146 (2022).
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New Zealand Psychological Society Strategic Plan- [NZPsS Strategic Plan 2022-2027](#)

Prickett, M., Reuvecamp, I., Hales, S., and Baker, M. (2024). [Fast-track Bill puts NZ on wrong track, threatening public health](#). 'The Briefing', Public Health Communication Centre. April, 2024. <https://www.phcc.org.nz/briefing/fast-track-bill-puts-nz-wrong-track-threatening-public-health>

Rafa, N., Zabala, A., Galway, L., (2025) Empirical research review on Solastalgia: Place, people and policy pathways for addressing environmental distress. *People and Nature*. Vol 7, Iss 8, p1811-1825 <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.70090>

Contact:

PO Box 10536, Wellington Box Lobby l Wellington 6011 www.psychology.org.nz Ph: 04 473 4883
executivedirector@psychology.org.nz