

# Council Planners get their Knuckles Rapped

## Minister tells councils not to use worst-case climate scenarios as the default

Climate Change Minister Simon Watts has written to mayors, council chairs and chief executives across New Zealand, advising councils not to use the high-end climate scenario SSP5-8.5 (formerly RCP8.5) as the default basis for planning decisions.

The letter does not tell councils to stop planning for climate change. Rather, it emphasises that climate-risk decisions should be based on a range of credible scenarios and be proportionate, evidence-based, adaptive and affordable.

The guidance is likely to attract close scrutiny in Kāpiti, where residents have for years questioned the Council's reliance on worst-case climate assumptions for coastal and flood-hazard planning.

During earlier coastal-hazard work, many residents challenged the Council's use of RCP8.5 and, more recently, SSP5-8.5, arguing that these scenarios were intended primarily for stress testing rather than as the default basis for planning decisions with significant consequences for private property. Residents also questioned whether alternative scientific views and independent expert advice had received appropriate consideration.

## Questions for Kāpiti

The Government's message is clear: councils should consider a range of credible climate scenarios, apply adaptive pathways, and ensure that decisions affecting communities and private property are underpinned by robust evidence and appropriate independent review.

That direction may have significant implications for the Kāpiti Coast District Council's commissioned Coastal Vulnerability Assessment and the Flood Hazard Assessment, paid for by Kapiti ratepayers.

The assessments identified thousands of properties as potentially exposed to coastal hazards and flooding, using modelling that included SSP5-8.5. Those hazard maps have the potential to influence insurance availability and premiums, mortgage lending, property values, development rights and homeowner confidence, even before any formal planning provisions are implemented.

## Cost and Accountability

The Council must now determine whether its existing coastal and flood-hazard work aligns with the Government's updated expectations.

Beyond the financial cost, there is the impact already experienced by thousands of homeowners, including uncertainty, higher insurance premiums, concerns about mortgage availability, and the stigma associated with hazard mapping.

Many residents will also question whether this situation could have been avoided. CRU has long argued that the Council placed undue reliance on non-statutory Ministry for the Environment guidance, while giving insufficient weight to statutory planning requirements.

Had the Council applied the statutory planning framework from the outset, rather than relying on the most extreme emissions scenarios as the default for its modelling, the outcome would have presented a far more balanced picture of risk.

This would demonstrate that Kāpiti is, by any objective standard, a safe environment for residence, investment, and raising a family. In an era when communities are seeking reassurance, this positive message has unfortunately been overlooked.

The Minister's letter is one of the clearest signals yet that central government expects councils to review how climate scenarios inform long-term planning. Climate change planning remains essential, but planning based primarily on the most extreme emissions scenario is no longer presented as the default approach.

For Kāpiti, the questions are now unavoidable. Does the Council's existing hazard modelling remain fit for purpose? What will it cost to revise work already undertaken? And who will ultimately be accountable if planning decisions based on the highest-end scenarios have imposed unnecessary costs and uncertainty on thousands of property owners?

These are questions the community is entitled to have answered.