

# Wetlands in the Waikato region

The Waikato region has two main types of wetland: low-nutrient wetlands (bogs) and highly fertile wetlands (swamps). Fens are intermediate in fertility and sometimes occur at the edges of bogs. Over 80 per cent of our remaining wetlands are in lowland areas in the Waikato, Matamata–Piako and Hauraki districts.

## Bogs

Bogs are areas of low-nutrient peat (partly decayed and waterlogged plant material) that are fed by rainwater alone and have high and relatively stable water levels. In these conditions, things decay very slowly. The dead plant material does not readily break down and builds up as peat, forming low domes, like the Kopouatai Peat Dome in the Hauraki Plains.

The most common plants in Waikato bogs are jointed rushes, including the rare endemic giant cane rush (*Sporadanthus*) and the small wire rush (*Empodisma*).

Other peat bog plants include:

- sphagnum moss
- orchids
- sundews
- bladderworts
- sedges
- umbrella ferns.

Fernbirds, rare black mudfish, insects and the large orb-weaving spider live among the rushes in peat bogs. Many other types of bird and fish live on the more fertile edges of the bog. The rare cane rust moth (*Houdinia flexilissima*) is found only in Waikato bogs, living inside the stems of the giant cane rush.

## Swamps and fens – Fertile wetlands

Fertile wetlands are fed by nutrient-rich ground and surface water, as well as rainwater. Their water levels vary seasonally, and they are often flooded by water loaded with silt and nutrients when river or lake levels are high. Moderately fertile fens are found at the edges of low-nutrient peat bogs and peat lakes, and in depressions where there is some groundwater influence. Kahikatea, manuka and sedges may be found in these wetlands.

Highly fertile swamps are greatly influenced by groundwater and surface run-off and may be found on the edges of lakes, in poorly drained river deltas and in wet gullies. Common plants include raupo, harakeke (flax) and some sedges. Swamps are very productive and support a wide variety of plants and animals adapted to seasonally changing water levels. They are readily invaded by introduced plants such as grey and crack willow, which can dominate the vegetation and degrade the wetland.

Location of swamp and fen vegetation in the Waikato region

- Large stands of kahikatea swamp forest occur alongside the Awaroa Stream, which enters Lake Whangape, near Huntly.
- Mānuka and sedgeland wetlands are widely distributed across the region with major concentrations in the Waikato lowlands, including the Whangamarino wetland and the edge of the Kopouatai peat dome.
- Large areas of raupō wetland are found in the Tongariro River delta at the southern side of Lake Taupō, and at the edge of the Lower Waikato lakes.
- Flax-dominated wetlands are most common in the Taupō area, particularly at higher altitudes (above 300m). A large flax wetland occurs at Lake Rotoaira, with another at Waitahauni, adjacent to Lake Taupō.

## Management of wetlands

The existing Waikato Regional Plan provides necessary restrictions on water takes and discharges of contaminants to our most important wetlands. The regional plan restricts these activities through non-complying activity rules and enables other activities subject to the activity not resulting in any adverse effects on wetlands. The regional plan also enables certain activities as long as they occur outside of any wetlands that are areas of significant indigenous vegetation and/or significant habitats of indigenous fauna. The regional plan does not provide for the different types or characteristics of wetlands; however, the Waikato Regional Policy Statement does include provisions which provide specifically for peat wetlands.

The National Environmental Standard for Freshwater 2020 (NESFW) introduced standards that relate to natural inland wetlands and regulate the taking, using, damming, diversion, and some discharge of water within, or within a 100m setback from, a natural inland wetland, earthworks or land disturbance and vegetation clearance within, or within a 10m setback from, a natural inland wetland. The regulations do not distinguish between the characteristics of the different types of wetlands. Under Regulation 6 of the NESFW, regional rules may be more stringent than the regulations; however, in terms of natural inland wetlands, a regional rule may not be more lenient than the regulations. Therefore, regional councils are able to impose more stringent regional rules, which may provide for the characteristics of different types of wetlands within the different FMUs, where specific wetlands are degraded from activities and it is considered that the regulations will not achieve protection of those wetlands. The NESFW imposes different controls on these activities depending on the purpose for which they are carried out.

## Next steps

The council is currently in the process of reviewing its regional plan requirements in a project called the Freshwater Policy Review. The review will need to consider:

- what a robust regulatory framework for wetlands generally looks like
- the need for regionally specific wetland rules given that the NESFW already provides a comprehensive and arguably strict regulatory framework for most activities that will or has the potential to affect a wetland.
- removing duplication and inconsistency between the regional plan provisions and the NESFW.



## Mō te puna kōrero Where can I find more information?

Check out [waikatoregion.govt.nz/freshwater-policy-review](https://waikatoregion.govt.nz/freshwater-policy-review) to find:

- information sheets breaking down the Freshwater Policy Review
- how to share your views
- a summary of key milestones
- update on our progress.

You can also email us at [policy@waikatoregion.govt.nz](mailto:policy@waikatoregion.govt.nz) or call 0800 800 401 to speak to a member of our Freshwater Policy Review team.