

2013

# Monitoring Steps

State of the environment monitoring



## State of the environment monitoring

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State of the environment (SOE) monitoring and reporting can provide early warning of environmental problems and illustrate where environmental management has been effective. It allows councils and communities to access information on the state or condition of the environment and key environmental pressures, and to assess possible and actual responses. See the [framework model for core national environmental indicators](#). State of the environment monitoring informs decision-making by helping determine the need for further action, and by indicating broadly where policies and actions can be improved or may need review.

Section 35(2)(a) of the Resource Management Act (RMA) requires local authorities to monitor the state of the whole or any part of the environment to the extent that is appropriate to enable the local authority to effectively carry out its functions under the RMA. Monitoring must also reference any indicators or other matters prescribed by regulation.

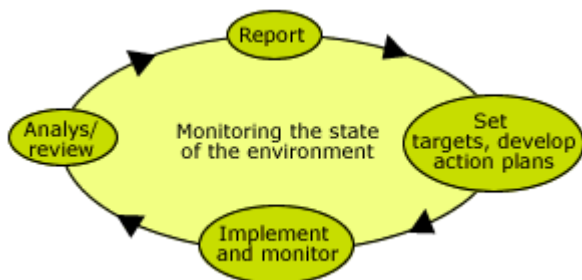
An integrated approach to monitoring under both the Local Government Act 2002 (LGA) and the RMA is important and is discussed further in this guidance material.

### Purpose of state of the Environment monitoring and reporting

#### Why monitor and report on the state of the environment?

Part II of the RMA requires councils to promote the sustainable management of natural and physical resources. State of the environment monitoring and reporting can help determine whether these requirements are being met. State of the environment monitoring helps with policy development and informs decision-makers of the consequences of actions and changes in the environment. It involves setting targets, monitoring, analysing and interpreting data, then reporting findings, and continuing this process over time. This is similar to the 'plan - do - monitor - review' cycle described in the [Getting started guidance note](#).

#### Monitoring the state of the environment cycle figure





## THE RMA QUALITY PLANNING RESOURCE

The purpose of state of the environment reports is to:

- compile and assess information regularly on the condition of the environment, the key pressures on it, and what has been and can be done to address pressures (the responses)
- provide information to answer basic questions, including:
  - what is happening in the environment?
  - why is it happening?
  - where are the gaps in our knowledge?
  - what are we doing about it (can we do something to make a difference)?
  - has what we have done made a difference to the type or rate of environmental change?
  - how do we compare (over time and space and with others)?
- help councils report on how well they are achieving their stated goals (information and input into policy and plan monitoring)
- educate people about their local environment and inspire community action. This may require links to education strategies
- provide some accountability in terms of expenditure
- develop data into useful information for decision-making
- provide information for other reporting and review.

### **Some important tips to remember:**

- develop criteria to prioritise monitoring activities and make monitoring cost-effective eg, prioritisation table. Be focused and monitor the most important things first. This will involve establishing priorities with your key audiences
- ensure there is quality, robust data to show key trends - have a long-term perspective, a strategic approach and establish clear protocols and systems for gathering the information
- be clear about data quality and reliability and be mindful of the context within which data is collected and in which it will be used eg, what does it mean?
- do not monitor for the sake of monitoring
- integrate different types of monitoring
- new issues will emerge so be flexible
- monitor and report on key indicators
- review indicators to allow for improving performance
- ensure feedback is provided to the council (to inform policy development) and community (for environmental education)
- obtain senior management and political support and ongoing resourcing.

### **Scope of SOE monitoring and reporting**

- Determine what drives the monitoring and reporting and what the information will be used for:
  - RMA functions or broader?
  - strategic planning and Long Term Plans?
  - regional policy statement?



## THE RMA QUALITY PLANNING RESOURCE

- district or regional plan?
- higher-level policy documents to report against?
- Provide information on what is happening in the environment, the key pressures and trends and include a section on responses eg, Pressure, State, Response.
- If relevant link to other information, monitoring and reporting undertaken by other agencies (eg, Statistics NZ, health agencies, other councils, Ministry for the Environment, Department of Conservation, etc).
- Collaborative reporting by local authorities within a region may work well, and is especially relevant for combined policy statements or plans under s80 of the RMA - councils should draw similar conclusions about the environment in the same area - and can be cost-effective. Develop processes for ongoing reporting, eg, regional monitoring forums.
- Ensure reporting focuses on outcomes (not just process and outputs) and links to plan implementation and effectiveness monitoring
- Consider having issue based reports for key emerging issues and link these to plans and policies
- Review resource management plans and resource consents based on the results.

### Know your audience

In most cases there are several target audiences for state of the environment reports. Possible audiences may include council, staff, iwi, the general public, industry and business, environmental groups, professional associations, consultants and schools.

- Ensure your reporting meets the needs of your audience eg, if it is a councillor audience focus on what will be most useful and interesting to them and ensure that the format suits their needs.
- You may consider having a range of different reporting formats for different audiences (refer to guidance later in this note on formats).
- Include your environmental education staff in reporting as state of the environment reports can be useful education tools and environmental education staff may be able to help you.

### Develop a monitoring strategy and an integrated approach

- Develop a monitoring strategy/framework to identify where state of the environment monitoring and reporting fit.
- Ensure long term financial planning/allocation for the state of the environment programme.
- Coordinate and ensure support within council.
- Ensure co-operation and coordination between agencies (eg, district and regional councils and the Ministry for the Environment).
- Rationalise where possible, eg, water quality monitoring is needed both by district and regional councils (both a health and ecology issue).
- Make the most of the data you already collect and supplementary information from different agencies. Combine useful information from existing databases.



## THE RMA QUALITY PLANNING RESOURCE

- Aim to recognise cause and effect relationships where possible - what has changed, and how does this relate to the plan?
- Have a good project management process.

### Who to involve

- Have the senior management and politicians on board (corporate commitment is important) for ongoing resourcing and action.
  - Link state of the environment to issues that are relevant to council functions.
  - Show how state of the environment information is useful.
  - Demonstrate the benefits of being a data provider and manager.
- Have an integrated team from throughout council - include planners, scientists, managers, compliance and resource consent staff, IT and data management people, communications and education staff, as appropriate.
  - Consider using a neutral editor.
  - Consider having a data review process as quality of data is critical, particularly scientific data.
- Consider community viewpoints on key issues and whether to incorporate stakeholder/public perceptions ie, satisfaction surveys.
- Establish links between the monitoring programmes of other agencies and encourage partnership and integration (for example, with regional councils, territorial local authorities, Ministry for the Environment, Department of Conservation, Statistics NZ). Where appropriate develop partnership agreements and memorandums of understanding.
- Work with other councils on monitoring methodologies for similar issues, eg, amenity issues.

### SOE reporting formats

Written reports have been used extensively for state of the environment reporting in New Zealand and overseas (although systematic and ongoing reporting involves more than the production of written reports). Approaches to reporting may also include interactive, multimedia formats eg, web based reporting. It is important to determine the audience or audiences is/are for reporting and how best to communicate with them.

#### Some suggestions for reporting formats

- Reflect the audience's needs and the report's purpose in its style and format and consider using a variety of formats for different purposes.
- Keep things simple.
- Use relevant real life examples to bring issues alive.
- Communicate visually (and attractively) where possible - people like colour, maps, pictures, graphs and diagrams.
- Write for a non-technical audience, especially if preparing a hardcopy comprehensive written report.



## THE RMA QUALITY PLANNING RESOURCE

- Think about different ways of presenting information. Ideally have a series of reporting formats and products, for instance:
  - three- to five-yearly comprehensive written report
  - summary reports
  - annual update report
  - report cards
  - issues-based reports
  - resource user reports
  - web reporting (to provide greater use of links and to reach a wide audience)
  - pamphlets, flyers and newsletters.

### RMA provisions

**Section 28A** of the Resource Management Act enables the Minister of Conservation to require regional councils to provide monitoring information on their coastal permits, regional coastal plans or the exercise of protected customary right. Councils must provide this information within 20 working days, unless a longer timeframe has been set by the Minister of Conservation.

**Section 35** of the RMA specifies the duty to gather information, monitor and keep records. In particular **section 35(2)(a)** requires every local authority to monitor 'the state of the whole or any part of the environment of its region or district to the extent that is appropriate to enable the local authority to effectively carry out its functions under this Act...'

Although there is a requirement to gather information and keep records, there is no legal requirement to produce a written state of the environment report.

Under **section 35(2A)** local authorities are required to prepare a report at least every five years on the results of their monitoring under **section 35(2)(b)** for policy and plan efficiency and effectiveness. This may be in the form of an integrated policy/plan and state of the environment report.

**Section 35(3)** requires every local authority to keep reasonably available at its principal office, information which is relevant to the administration of policy statements and plans, the monitoring of resource consents, and current issues relating to the environment in the area, to enable the public:

- to be better informed of their duties and of the functions, powers and duties of the local authority
- to participate effectively under the Act.

**Section 360(hk), (hl) and (hm)** allow regulations to be made that specify requirements for indicators, standards, methods, thresholds and the timing of reporting.



THE RMA QUALITY PLANNING RESOURCE

**The Local Government Act 2002**

The Local Government Act (LGA) also requires monitoring. Under the Local Government Act, local authorities must prepare Long Term Plans. Long Term Plans must describe community outcomes, and each Long Term Plan (ie, every 3 years) must contain a report from the Auditor General on the extent to which the local authority has complied with the requirements of the Act, and on the quality of information and assumptions (s.94(1)).

