



## KAIPARA DISTRICT PLAN S42A NATURAL CHARACTER REPORT

Prepared for the Kaipara District Council

4 May 2026

### Introduction

1. My name is Braddyn (Brad) Coombs. I am a Principal Landscape Architect with Isthmus Group Limited (Isthmus). I have been contracted by the Kaipara District Council (KDC) to provide technical landscape expert advice on the Natural Features and Landscapes Chapter of the Proposed Kaipara District Plan (PDP).
2. I have a Bachelor of Horticulture from Massey University (1996) and a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (with honours) from Lincoln University (1997). I have almost 30 years' experience working mainly in the areas of landscape assessment and resource management throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and in the UK. I am a Registered Landscape Architect with the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects Tuia Pito Ora (NZILA) as well as being an elected Fellow and a past President of the Institute.
3. Of relevance to providing natural character advice for the PDP I have undertaken several projects in the Northland Region and within the Kaipara District and I am familiar with the landscapes and coastal areas of the District. I undertook a site visit through the district by car on 20 and 21 April to visit areas where submissions are relevant to.
4. I have prepared or supervised the preparation of several District-scale landscape assessments for the purposes of identifying and management of outstanding natural features and landscapes and areas of outstanding natural character. I have assisted several industry-based clients<sup>1</sup> in responding to District and Regional plan reviews and have contributed landscape and natural character advice to s42A Reports.
5. I am authorised by KDC to prepare this report to provide landscape advice to the author of the report prepared under s42A of the Resource Management Act (**RMA**) to assist the PDP Hearings Panel. The purpose of this report is to provide advice to the author of the s42A report in relation to submissions that have been received on the natural character chapter of the PDP. The s42A Report has been prepared by Ben Lee. This report includes my recommendations on matters raised in submissions.
6. I am the author of this report. The data, information, facts, and assumptions I have considered in forming my opinions are set out in my evidence. Where I have set out opinions in my evidence, I have given reasons for those opinions. I have not omitted to

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<sup>1</sup> For example, electricity generation and transmission companies and aquaculture clients.

consider material facts known to me that might alter or detract from the opinions expressed.

7. While this is not a hearing held by the Environment Court, I confirm that I have read the Code of Conduct for Expert Witness in the Environment Court Practice Note 2023 and that I have complied with it when preparing this report. Other than when I state that I am relying on the advice of another person, this evidence is within my area of expertise. I have not omitted to consider material facts known to me that might alter or detract from the opinions that I express.
8. I confirm that I have no real or perceived conflict of interest in relation to the Natural Character (NCAT) chapter.

### **Purpose and Report Structure**

9. The purpose of this report is to provide technical natural character advice to the s42A NATC Report author. The scope of this report is limited to the scope as set out in section 2 of the s42A Report and the consideration of the submissions relating to the NATC chapter
10. The statutory context for the consideration of submissions on the NATC chapter has been set out in the NCAT s42A Report. I rely on the s42A authors summary and consideration of the statutory context.

### **NATC Rules and Standards**

11. Section 8 of the s42A Report has provided analysis of the submissions on the Rules and Standards contained in the notified NATC chapter in section 8. I have reviewed the analysis and the suggested wording edits and I generally agree with the recommendations. More specific comment on submissions and recommendations is provided below.
12. The s42A Report author has requested specific advice from me on the Permitted Activity thresholds for buildings and structures (gross floor area), earthworks (area per year / site) and indigenous vegetation clearance (area per year / site) within freshwater margins. The thresholds are set out in the table below, which is reproduced from the s42A Report. For comparison and consistency, thresholds are also considered for ONFs and ONLs within the CE (and outside of it), noting the relative sensitivity of the overlays. Note that the freshwater margins column in the table is the relevant column for this report. Other columns are included for comparison. Eith recommendations within the CE yet to be determined.

### Permitted activity thresholds matrix

Key	
	Avoid adverse effects / discrete areas
	Avoid adverse effects / larger areas
	Avoid significant adverse effects / discrete areas

**Notes:**

- Figures in black = PDP as notified
- Figures in blue = recommended in s42A reports (NFL and Natural Character, Coastal Environment TBC)
- Some figures are expressed in the PDP and/or s42A recommendations as 10-year totals but have been presented in the matrix as per 1-year equivalents for ease of comparison.
- ONC = Outstanding natural character, ONF = Outstanding natural features, ONL = Outstanding natural landscapes, HNC = High natural character, CE = Coastal environment

	'Avoid adverse effects'			'Avoid significant effects'				
	ONC (CE)	ONF (CE)	ONL (CE)	HNC (CE)	ONF (Not CE)	Freshwater margins	ONL (not CE)	CE other
<b>Buildings and structures</b> (gross floor area)	0m <sup>2</sup> TBC	0m <sup>2</sup> 50m <sup>2</sup> in category 'A' and 'D' 25m <sup>2</sup> in ONF category B, C, and E	0m <sup>2</sup> 50m <sup>2</sup>	50m <sup>2</sup> TBC	150m <sup>2</sup> (residential unit) 100m <sup>2</sup> (accessory building) 100m <sup>2</sup> in ONF category 'A' and 'D' 25m <sup>2</sup> in ONF category B, C, and E	300m <sup>2</sup> 100m <sup>2</sup> / – specified purposes 50m <sup>2</sup> /yr - default	150m <sup>2</sup> (residential unit) 100m <sup>2</sup> (accessory building) 100m <sup>2</sup>	300m <sup>2</sup> TBC
<b>Earthworks</b> (volume per year / site)	0m <sup>3</sup> TBC	0m <sup>3</sup> 50m <sup>3</sup> in category A and D 0m <sup>3</sup> in category B, C, and E	0m <sup>3</sup> 50m <sup>3</sup>	25m <sup>3</sup> TBC	150m <sup>3</sup> 150m <sup>3</sup> in category 'A' and 'D' 5m <sup>3</sup> in ONF category B, C, and E	50m <sup>3</sup> 100m <sup>3</sup> - specified purposes 50m <sup>3</sup> - default	150m <sup>3</sup> 150m <sup>3</sup>	50m <sup>3</sup> TBC
<b>Indigenous vegetation clearance</b> (area per year / site)	0m <sup>2</sup> TBC	N/A	0m <sup>2</sup> 50m <sup>2</sup>	15m <sup>2</sup> TBC	NA	50m <sup>2</sup> 50m <sup>2</sup> – specified purposes 25m <sup>2</sup> -default	150m <sup>2</sup> 150m <sup>2</sup>	50m <sup>2</sup> TBC

Table 1: Permitted activity thresholds matrix

13. I have reviewed the recommendations in the table above and have discussed the rationale for setting building and structure footprints, earthworks and indigenous clearance vegetation thresholds for permitted activities in freshwater margins with the s42A author.

14. The freshwater margin thresholds are derived from an effects-based calibration exercise using the permitted activity thresholds matrix in the table above, which seeks to ensure

that permitted activities are limited to those with a low likelihood of resulting in significant adverse effects on natural character, while maintaining consistency across the comparative overlays that are subject to similar policy direction.

15. In this context, the freshwater margin thresholds are within the “avoid significant adverse effects” category, representing an intermediate level of sensitivity relative to other overlays, and ensuring that permitted activity limits remain sufficiently conservative to manage cumulative and incremental effects on natural character.
16. The building and structure thresholds (including the distinction between default and specified-purpose limits) limit the scale and intensity of development within freshwater margins, such that built form is generally small-scale or functionally necessary, and therefore unlikely to result in significant adverse effects on the natural character attributes of these environments, including their naturalness and degree of modification.
17. The earthworks thresholds reflect the sensitivity of freshwater margins to disturbance, and are set at a level where activities are typically small-scale or associated with maintenance or necessary functions, such that disruption to landform, natural processes and riparian margins is unlikely to be of a scale or extent that would give rise to significant adverse effects on natural character.
18. The recommended approach to indigenous vegetation clearance is more conservative, recognising that indigenous riparian vegetation is a core determinant of natural character, and that even relatively small-scale clearance can result in a noticeable and enduring reduction in naturalness. The lower default threshold and narrowly defined higher allowances appropriately respond to this sensitivity.
19. The thresholds in the freshwater margins column respond to the risk of cumulative and incremental change over time, ensuring that repeated small-scale activities do not, in aggregate, result in a degradation of natural character that would otherwise undermine the policy direction to avoid significant adverse effects.
20. Overall, the freshwater margin thresholds provide a proportionate and targeted regulatory response, enabling activities that are demonstrably low risk in natural character terms, while ensuring that activities with a greater potential to adversely affect the characteristics, qualities and processes that underpin natural character are subject to assessment through resource consent.
21. Several submissions have been received requesting changes to the rules and standards relating to the clearance of indigenous vegetation within freshwater margins. Before considering the submissions on the rules and standards, I consider it important to recognise the role of indigenous vegetation in contributing to the natural character of freshwater margins.
22. Indigenous riparian vegetation is a key contributor to natural character. Freshwater margins with intact indigenous vegetation generally have higher natural character values than those where vegetation has been cleared or heavily modified.

23. Indigenous riparian vegetation contributes to the natural character of freshwater margins in the following key ways:
- a. **Retaining natural form and processes.** Indigenous vegetation helps maintain natural channel shape, bank form, shading, and hydrological processes.
  - b. **Reducing the visible presence of human modification.** Vegetated margins soften the appearance of nearby land use, buildings and structures, helping freshwater margins appear natural rather than managed or urban. As they follow natural margins, indigenous riparian vegetation tends to be an indicator of a natural system – stream, river, lake edge, wetland, etc.
  - c. **Indicating the level of natural character.** The presence and extent of indigenous vegetation is one of the clearest indicators of how natural a freshwater margin is, along the spectrum from highly modified to largely natural. Higher indigenous and ecological habitat values tends to have higher natural character values.
  - d. **Providing sensory and experiential naturalness.** Indigenous vegetation contributes to a natural experience of freshwater margins through shade, enclosure, natural sounds, vegetation movement and the presence of native birds and fauna.
  - e. **Supporting cultural relationships with freshwater.** Indigenous vegetation supports cultural values associated with freshwater margins, including mahinga kai and rongoā, which are closely tied to perceptions of naturalness and intact natural environments.
24. Buildings, structures and earthworks within freshwater margins often occur where indigenous vegetation has already been removed or substantially modified. In these situations, the natural character of the margin has already been reduced, and additional buildings, structures or earthworks are often incremental changes within an already modified environment.
25. Indigenous vegetation clearance is different. Where indigenous vegetation remains, or is planted, its removal represents the direct loss of a core element that gives the freshwater margin its natural character. Even relatively small areas of clearance can result in a noticeable and lasting reduction in natural character values.
26. Indigenous riparian vegetation is therefore a fundamental component of the natural character of freshwater margins under section 6(a) of the RMA and why its retention is central to avoiding significant adverse effects on natural character. For this reason, it is appropriate that indigenous vegetation clearance is treated with more caution than buildings, structures or earthworks in the NATC chapter. While some buildings and earthworks can be provided for more broadly—particularly where they are small scale or relate to existing development—permitted vegetation clearance should, in my opinion, be limited to narrowly defined circumstances.
27. This approach is consistent with the requirement to preserve natural character and protect it from inappropriate development and has informed my support for several of the recommendations on the NATC rules and standards below.
28. Several submissions supported retaining the NAT-C rules and standards as they are or with some amendments. I have read the analysis in section 8.2 of the s42A Report on the submissions and is particular the assessment and response tables in 8.2.7, 8.2.8 and 8.2.9.

I have also reviewed the recommended amendments and retentions in the tables in section 8.3. I agree with the overall approach and the changes recommended to the NATC rules and standards.

29. The s42A Report recommends various amendments to the alteration to buildings and structures in NATC-R1 as permitted activities in wetland, lake and river margins. Some submitters requested provision for larger or more permissive extensions to buildings or structures.
30. The additions and alterations include limited provisions for building alterations or extensions and above ground utilities which are limited height and area and do not allow for additional utility poles. The alterations and additions are generally associated with existing activities or are very limited in scale. The amended wording in NAT-R1 restricts extensions to 20% of the existing floor area of the building or structure, so is an incremental allowance that is proportional to the existing building or structure. The height is limited to 10m or the height of the existing building or structure.
31. In my opinion providing for limited and proportional building alterations, utilities and development within the margins of wetlands, lakes and rivers as set out in NATC-R1 is appropriate.
32. Forest and Bird [149.53] requested a reduction in the cut depth of earthworks in the margins of wetlands, lakes and river from 2m to 0.5m in NATC-S2.2. I note that the threshold for the avoidance of effects on NCAT in freshwater margins is to avoid significant adverse effects, rather than the avoidance of all adverse effects on NATC.
33. An earthwork cut of 0.5m is overly restrictive in the context of the natural topography which occurs within the margins of wetlands, lakes and rivers and would not allow for any practical earthworks at all. The scale of a 0.5m earthworks cut would be almost imperceptible and would lead to monitoring and compliance difficulties in measuring such a small change in level. The allowance for some earthworks should allow for the construction of a small bridge or retaining wall for a permitted activity standard to be effective.
34. In my opinion the 2m maximum earthworks cut in NATC-S2.2 is appropriate in the context of the margins of wetlands, lakes and rivers, noting that high or outstanding NATC overlays include other earthworks standards and rules. Earthworks with a cut depth of 2m would be unlikely to have significant adverse effects on the NATC values within freshwater margins. See the earthworks permitted activity thresholds recommended in the NATC matrix above.
35. Forest and Bird [149.52] request a reduction in the maximum allowable height for buildings and structures in freshwater margins from 5.5 m to 2 m NATC-S1. Similar to the earthworks cut dimension above, a 2m height limit for buildings a meaningful permitted allowance for a building. A 2m height standard would allow for the construction of a fence or a small pump shed, for example, but would not allow for the construction of an implement shed or a habitable building. A height standard of 4.5m would allow for the construction of a single level building, with some allowance for articulated roof pitch and auxiliary features. It is my recommendation that the height standard for buildings and structures in freshwater margins should be reduced to 4.5m, noting that the default

maximum footprint area of 25m<sup>2</sup> would limit the types and number of buildings that would be constructed in the freshwater margins.

36. In my opinion a 4.5m maximum building height in NATC-S1 is appropriate in the context of the freshwater margins, noting that high or outstanding NATC overlays include other building and structure standards and rules.

**Brad Coombs**

**Isthmus**

**4 May 2026**