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Committee Environment Committee
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Biodiversity protection on private land

1. Purpose

To inform the Committee of progress in assisting private landowners wishing to protect biodiversity on their land by way of perpetual QEII National Trust covenants. (This report will be supplemented by a brief slide presentation)

2. Background

Greater Wellington has recognised for some time that some ecosystem types in the region, such as wetlands, dunes, coastal escarpments and lowland forest, are depleted and under-represented in the protected estate. The Council has developed specific strategies and programmes to address this issue. One of the programmes for lowland forest is the “QEII programme”.

Private landowners wishing to legally protect areas of biodiversity value on their land can enter into covenant agreements with QEII National Trust (QEII). Such covenants bind existing and subsequent owners to manage the area in question (normally a block of native bush or wetland) to protect and enhance its natural values.

The costs involved in establishing a covenant typically relate to the need to fence the area to exclude stock and define the area by survey to enable registration on the title. These costs are normally shared by the landowner and QEII. In 2000 Greater Wellington established a fund to enable the costs of establishing covenants in the region to be shared. The effect of this funding is two-fold. First, the cost to the landowner of covenanting is reduced thus making it more attractive to landowners and, secondly, the per covenant cost to QEII is reduced enabling the Trust to undertake more work in our region.

3. What have we achieved?

The funding for this assistance has increased from \$30,000 in 2000/2001 to \$50,000 in the current financial year. The summarised achievements for each of the four years are as follows:

2000/01	Type	No.	Area (hectares)
	Lowland forest remnants	3	40
	Coastal or semi-coastal forest remnants	3	100

A highlight of the first year of the programme was the protection of 60 hectares of strongly regenerating semi-coastal forest at Long Gully, South Karori. The property is owned by a charitable conservation trust and is contiguous with the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary.

2001/02	Type	No.	Area (hectares)
	Lowland forest remnants	10	68
	Coastal or semi-coastal forest remnants	2	20
	Wetland/lake	2	12

Among the covenants approved in this year was Tora Bush on the southern Wairarapa coast. The covenant consists of 10 hectares of once widespread but now rare coastal forest ranked highly by the Department of Conservation's Protected Natural Areas (PNA) survey.

2002/03	Type	No.	Area (hectares)
	Lowland forest remnants	13	195
	Coastal or semi-coastal forest remnants	1	2
	Wetlands	3	13

One of the proposals approved for funding in the 2002/03 year was a 20 hectare block of predominantly totara on the Otaki Plains. The Department of Conservation PNA survey noted that "this area is the healthiest and by the far the largest area of totara over kohekohe forest in the Ecological District". The area adjoins another recently protected covenant.

2003/04	Type	No.	Area (hectares)
	Lowland forest remnants	15	294
	Coastal or semi-coastal forest remnants	3	22
	Wetlands	3	11

In this financial year a highlight has been the approval for protection of 5.5 hectares of old growth swamp forest at Waikanae. This forest type was once widespread but is now extremely rare. The report to the QEII Board noted that the covenant was "among the most significant proposals for protection to come forward in the western part of the Wellington region".

4. Covenant management issues

Recently, greater acknowledgement has been given to the need to manage protected areas, particularly to address problems such as plant and animal pests. The latter can become a problem once grazing pressure is removed from a covenanted area. For some landowners this issue has been a disincentive to enter into a covenant, while for others the task is beyond their resources or capabilities.

From 1 July 2003, Greater Wellington has been able to respond to this issue from a dedicated “Condition Fund”. Where QEII or the landowner have identified a problem, an inspection is made by a Greater Wellington Biosecurity Officer to provide an estimate of the costs involved. Any Greater Wellington expenditure is matched by QEII. The fund is only applied to new covenants at the time of their establishment. To date the funding has been applied to the control of pest plants including Old Man’s Beard and Japanese honeysuckle. More than one landowner has indicated that the availability of such support was a factor in their decision to covenant.

The time lag between the legal creation of covenants and their implementation on farms means that this ‘condition’ fund has not been fully taken up in its first year. Some of the surplus funds have therefore been applied to the creation of additional covenants on farms (i.e. surveying and fencing costs). This problem is expected to arise only this year (2003 – 04).

5. Strategic context

The “QEII Programme”, by assisting private landowners to legally protect biodiversity on their land in perpetuity and providing support for management issues, contributes to Greater Wellington’s objectives for lowland ecosystems. The programme directly contributes to the biodiversity targets of ‘Towards a Sustainable Region’.

6. Communications

As covenanted areas remain in private ownership, the opportunities for publicity are limited. However, the support provided by Greater Wellington is regularly acknowledged in QEII’s national magazine “Open Space” and an article highlighting the success of the programme will appear in an issue of “Elements” later this year.

7. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee:

1. *receive the report; and*
2. *note the contents.*

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