

To: Environment Select Committee

From: Wood Processors and Manufacturers Association of NZ
(WPMA)

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Subject: Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Wood Processors and Manufacturers Association of NZ (WPMA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Planning Bill and the Natural Environment Bill. As a sector that relies on efficient consent processing, resilient supply chains and infrastructure, plus sustainable environmental management, wood processors and manufacturers have a direct interest in ensuring that the new legislative framework is workable, enabling, and future-focused. This is important to encourage investment and growth within our industry.
- 1.2 WPMA is a voluntary industry-based Association representing producers of sawn lumber, pulp, paper, panels, laminated products, mouldings, engineered wood, and bio-forestry products. Total sales of wood products both domestically and globally in 2025 was approximately \$5 billion. The wider industry employs close to 30,000 staff, mostly in regional New Zealand. The wood processing industry contributes significantly to regional employment, export earnings, and the transition to a low-emissions, circular bioeconomy.
- 1.4 We support the intent of the reforms to simplify planning, reduce consenting delays, and provide clearer environmental outcomes. The current RMA system is widely recognised as slow, costly, and uncertain.
- 1.5 The proposed shift to a more strategic, outcomes-based framework has the potential to unlock economic development while strengthening environmental protections. However, aspects of the Bills require refinement to ensure they do not unintentionally constrain wood processing and manufacturing operations, future log supply, forest supply chains, or investment into our industry.

2. Key Issues and Recommendations

2.1 **One-year consenting timeframe for wood processing applications welcomed**

- 2.1.1 WPMA thank the Committee for endorsing Clause 118 in the Planning Act and Clause 139 in the Natural Environment Bill – *‘Certain consents must be processed and decided no later than 1 year after lodgement’ (1) The time period within which a consent authority must process and decide an application for a planning consent for a specified energy activity or **wood processing** activity (the time period) is 1 year after the date that the application is lodged.*
- 2.1.2 The introduction of this one year consenting timeframe from lodgment date in the Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill is a positive step toward improving certainty for wood processing operators, but several practical issues remain. While the statutory deadline is welcome, the process still risks being slowed by complex assessment requirements, variable council capacity, and overlapping

national and regional obligations. Without clearer national direction, the one year consenting limit may be difficult to meet in practice.

- 2.1.3 The framework would benefit from more detailed guidance on what constitutes a complete application, streamlined information requirements for low risk or established wood processing activities, and stronger alignment between environmental limits and industry specific standards. Ensuring councils have the resources and tools to process applications within the mandated timeframe is equally important.
- 2.1.4 Overall, the one year consenting pathway is welcomed, but its success will depend on reducing procedural duplication, improving consistency across regions, and providing clearer national direction to support timely, predictable consenting decisions for the wood processing sector.

Recommendations

- Development of guidance material for councils and others to assist in streamlining wood processing and manufacturing consent applications.
- Ensure fast track pathways remain available for regionally significant wood processing and manufacturing projects.

2.2 National Planning Framework (NPF)

- 2.2.1 The Natural Environment Bill establishes the NPF as the primary mechanism for setting environmental limits and outcomes. While we support national consistency, the NPF must:
 - Recognise plantation forestry and wood processing as essential components of New Zealand's economy, plus emission reduction solutions.
 - Avoid overly restrictive limits that could constrain harvesting, transport, or mill expansion.
 - Provide clear direction on balancing environmental limits with economic wellbeing.

Recommendation:

Explicitly recognise the role of forestry and wood processing in achieving national emissions reduction and climate resilience objectives within the NPF.

2.3 Regional Planning Committees and Combined Plans

- 2.3.1 The Planning Bill proposes new Regional Planning Committees responsible for preparing a single plan per region. While this simplifies the current system, wood processors rely on consistent rules across multiple districts.

Concerns:

- Risk of regional inconsistency in rules affecting transport routes, industrial zoning, and infrastructure.
- Potential for delays during the transition to new combined plans.
- Limited guaranteed industry representation in plan development.

Recommendations:

- Require Regional Planning Committees to consult with nationally significant industries, including wood processing.
- Ensure transitional provisions protect existing use rights and avoid disruption to long-term supply agreements.
- Provide clear statutory timeframes for plan development to avoid prolonged uncertainty.

2.4 Infrastructure and Transport

- 2.4.1 The infrastructure consenting framework in the Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill aims to streamline approvals, but several gaps could limit its effectiveness. While the intention to create more predictable pathways is positive, the process still risks being slowed by overlapping national direction, environmental limits, and variable council capacity. Without clearer, standardised requirements, the consenting burden for essential infrastructure may remain high and uneven across regions.
- 2.4.2 One of the key drivers for reform is to reduce the cost of and time for consenting major infrastructure and development projects. A 2021 report for the Infrastructure Commission¹ estimated that current consenting processes for infrastructure projects cost \$1.29 billion per year and that it took nearly twice as long to obtain a resource consent for key projects as it did five years before. Note, this estimate considered only RMA processes. It did not include the costs of other environmental related legislation.
- 2.4.3 The Bills would benefit from more explicit guidance on prioritising national and regionally significant infrastructure, including clearer criteria for fast-track pathways and more consistent information requirements. Stronger alignment between regional spatial strategies, environmental limits, and long term infrastructure planning would also help reduce duplication and improve certainty for investors and councils.
- 2.4.4 The infrastructure reforms are a move in the right direction, but achieving timely, efficient consenting will require more consistent national direction, reduced procedural complexity, and better resourcing to support councils in meeting statutory timeframes.

¹ The Cost of Consenting of Infrastructure Projects in New Zealand, July 2021, Sapere report commissioned by the Infrastructure Commission.

2.4.5 Wood processors depend on reliable transport networks for log supply and product distribution. The Bills aim is to streamline infrastructure consenting, but the framework must ensure:

- Prioritisation of upgrades to rural roads, bridges, and rail used heavily by forestry.
- Recognition of the economic importance of freight intensive industries.
- Avoidance of environmental limits that inadvertently restrict essential infrastructure maintenance.

Recommendation:

Include clear direction in the NPF and regional plans to safeguard and enhance infrastructure that supports the wood processing industry.

2.5 Climate Change and the Bioeconomy

Wood processing is central to New Zealand’s transition to a low-emissions economy. Timber products store carbon, displace high emissions materials, and support circular manufacturing. The Bills should explicitly support industries that contribute to climate mitigation.

Recommendation:

Add a statutory requirement for planning decisions to consider climate mitigation benefits of renewable, low carbon industries such as wood processing.

3. Conclusion

3.1 The Planning Bill and Natural Environment Bill represent an opportunity to create a planning system that supports both environmental integrity and economic prosperity. Wood processors are ready to play a central role in New Zealand’s economic and sustainable future, with incentives needed to enable investment, innovation, and long-term industry viability.

3.2 The proposed consenting framework for wood processing under the RMA reform represents a step toward greater clarity, but some items would benefit from refinement. The current approach still places a significant administrative burden on operators, particularly smaller processors, due to overlapping assessment requirements and variable interpretations across regions. Streamlining the criteria for environmental effects, especially for low-risk or established activities, would improve consistency and reduce delays.

3.3 There is also an opportunity to better align the consenting pathway with national objectives for decarbonisation and regional economic development. Providing clearer national direction, such as standardised thresholds, templates, or permitted activity conditions, would help councils apply the rules more uniformly and give

industry greater certainty. Strengthening coordination between regional and district planning layers would further reduce duplication and improve efficiency.

3.4 The Natural Environment Bill and the Planning Bill are designed to work together as part of New Zealand's major reform of the Resource Management Act. The Natural Environment Bill establishes environmental limits and outcomes, while the Planning Bill provides the framework for how land is planned, used, and developed. Together, they influence how much land can be allocated or prioritised for activities such as tree planting. This is important to the wood processing industry as securing future land availability for planting plantation forests is essential to ensuring future log supply for New Zealand mills.

The Wood Processors and Manufacturers Association

About us:

The Wood Processors and Manufacturers Association of NZ (WPMA) is a voluntary funded industry association. Our members are leaders in the New Zealand wood industry converting harvested logs into a wide range of products including sawn lumber, pulp, paperboard, panels, laminated products, mouldings, and engineered wood, through to the development of forest bio-products. Total sales of industry products both domestically and globally in 2025 were approximately \$5.2 billion. The industry employs close to 30,000 staff, mostly in the New Zealand regions. For more details see <https://www.wpma.org.nz/>

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