

Climate Change Politics and Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand

Environmental Policy and Politics
Network (EPPN) Workshop

23 July 2026



There is widespread consensus regarding the urgent need for ambitious cross-sectoral policy and action to address the critical threats posed by climate change. However, to date, Aotearoa New Zealand's climate change policy has been overwhelmingly inadequate. A series of policy shortfalls and reversals over the past 25 years have resulted in a fragmented, incoherent and hollow climate policy regime that has failed to curb growing emissions or to develop and implement adaptation strategies to address for the impacts of climate change.

In this context, this workshop will bring together researchers exploring different dimensions of climate change policy and politics in Aotearoa New Zealand, from local government responses, to climate change mitigation and adaptation at the national level, the diplomatic implications of Aotearoa's climate policy, and the role of social movements and climate change activism.

- WHO:** All welcome!
- WHEN:** 9.15 - 4.00
Thursday 23 July 2026
- WHERE:** RH102 VUW Pipitea Campus
and [online](#).
- RSVP:** Please RSVP [here](#).

WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

9.15 - 9.30 Workshop Welcome

9.30 - 10.30 Session 1: Agricultural Climate Change Policy in Aotearoa

- The climate agrarian question in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Regulating agricultural emissions in Aotearoa New Zealand: A discourse analysis of the He Waka Eke Noa Primary Sector Climate Action Partnership

10.30 - 11.00 Morning Tea

11.00 - 12.00 Session 2: National Action and International Implications

- Translating global coastal climate adaptation governance into national practice: Lessons for strengthening New Zealand's adaptation framework
- Assessing New Zealand's response to South-South climate diplomacy in the South Pacific

12.00 - 12.30 Lunch

12.30 - 2.00 Session 3: Local Climate Change Policy and Politics

- Climate change in the neighbourhood: Climate emergency declarations and local government elections in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Exploring transformative governance: Investigating climate change responses in two local governments in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Policy failure and political inertia: Exploring the barriers constraining community responses to climate disasters in Aotearoa New Zealand

2.00 - 2.15 Afternoon Tea

2.15 - 3.45 Session 4: Social Movements and Climate Activism

- Strategic logics for climate action: Evidence from a New Zealand study
- Climate Rebellion? The rise and decline of Extinction Rebellion Aotearoa New Zealand
- Governance gaps and emerging community responses

3.45 - 4.00 General Discussion and Workshop Conclusion

PAPER ABSTRACTS

Session 1: Agricultural Climate Change Policy in Aotearoa

The climate agrarian question in Aotearoa New Zealand

Faisal Al-Asaad and Ian Lovering (*Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington*)

This paper addresses the agrarian question at the heart of Aotearoa New Zealand's (ANZ) climate mitigation politics. Our key argument is that climate politics in ANZ are shaped as much by the economic fragility of the agricultural sector as by its political strength. Climate emissions in ANZ are disproportionately located in a dairy farming industry that has successfully been able to carve itself out of the national climate governance regime. This dynamic is traditionally explained by the political lobbying power of organised farmers. While important, such explanations do not account for the specific reasons why the dairy sector is so resistant to emissions governance. In contrast, we draw on agrarian political economy to analyse the social structures of ANZ dairy, characterised by colonial land ownership, untenured but entrepreneurial labour, and highly leveraged speculative agricultural capital. We argue that while dairy is structurally pivotal to the domestic economy of ANZ, in a global perspective it is precariously reliant on a high volume and low productivity model. It is this relative economic weakness, beyond political power, that has made the integration of dairy into climate emissions governance so challenging. From this perspective, emissions reduction for dairy is not simply a policy measure resolvable through agricultural innovation, but a potentially transformative shift to the agrarian class structures of ANZ.

Regulating agricultural emissions in Aotearoa New Zealand: A discourse analysis of the He Waka Eke Noa The Primary Sector Climate Action Partnership

Daniel Mason, Priya Kurian and Patrick Barrett (*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato - Waikato University*)

The New Zealand agriculture sector makes an outsized contribution to the nation's greenhouse gas emissions profile at approximately 50% of total emissions, yet it remains largely outside of policies to meet national and international commitments to reduce emissions. Two decades after the first attempt to price agricultural emissions, the sector remains exempt from any form of emissions pricing. This paper undertakes a discourse analysis of He Waka Eke Noa: The Primary Sector Climate Action Partnership (HWEN), the short-lived representative body comprised of leaders from industry organisations across New Zealand's primary sector tasked with finding an alternative method of pricing and reducing agricultural emissions to avoid the sector entering the New Zealand Emissions Trading Scheme. It investigates the discourses espoused by HWEN and contextualises them within the culturally and politically significant background of the agriculture sector in New Zealand. It argues that the long history of agricultural productivism followed by a sharp adjustment to neoliberal market ideology has positioned the sector against government intervention and regulation that promotes environmental protection, particularly in relation to climate change. The presentation of the HWEN proposal excluded any context of climate change mitigation and framed the policy problem as one of regulatory compliance. That framing served to simultaneously avoid conflict with a politically charged membership and strategically utilise rhetorical ambiguity to expand an audience susceptible to pre-existing narratives about the cultural significance of farming in New Zealand with the goal of undermining and stalling efforts to reduce domestic agricultural emissions.

Session 2: National Action and International Implications

Translating global coastal climate adaptation governance into national practice: Lessons for strengthening New Zealand's adaptation framework

Malsha Manohari and Suraweera Mudiyanseelage Kumuditha Upamal
(*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato - Waikato University*)

New Zealand's coastal regions face escalating climate-induced hazards, such as sea-level rise, compound flooding, coastal erosion, and storm surge, which increasingly outpace adaptation efforts due to a persistent policy-to-implementation gap. Addressing this gap requires a deeper examination of governance dynamics. This study adopts a governance arrangement perspective, defined as the structured configuration of actors, institutions, policy instruments, and decision-making processes shaping the design and implementation of climate adaptation. A Climate Adaptation Governance Arrangement (CAGA) framework is developed and applied through a systematic review of 230 peer-reviewed articles (2005–2025). The review synthesises insights on policy coherence, institutional interactions, and implementation processes that either enable or constrain climate adaptation planning, helping to unravel barriers to effective implementation. The paper identified 138 policy instruments, classified into six categories: strategic adaptation frameworks; regulatory and legal policies; land-use and spatial planning instruments; economic and financial mechanisms; institutional governance arrangements; and knowledge-based decision-support systems. Using this classification, global practices are compared with the New Zealand context, revealing that adaptation effectiveness is constrained by misalignment between policy objectives, institutional responsibilities, and the coordination of regulatory, economic, and adaptive mechanisms. The study highlights the need for context-sensitive policy translation, integrated governance structures, and strengthened institutional capacity to enable scalable, adaptive, and equitable coastal climate responses under intensifying risk.

Assessing New Zealand's response to South-South climate diplomacy in the South Pacific

Estelle Townshend (*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato - Waikato University*)

The New Zealand Government has increasingly chosen to align with US security interests, and this has meant greater efforts to engage with its South Pacific Island partners to fend off competition from China. Climate diplomacy is a growing focus for this competition, and the Pacific Island states are using this new-found interest in their friendship to leverage for better climate deals. This coincides with several developments that challenge Western hegemony in the South Pacific, such as the Cook Islands and China's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed in 2025. These developments demonstrate that South-South cooperation is increasing. This paper examines New Zealand's response to this pivotal moment. How is New Zealand responding to Global South powers' climate diplomacy in the South Pacific? And is the shifting international order towards multipolarity, and potentially away from Western hegemony in the South Pacific, reflected in New Zealand's climate diplomacy? The paper begins with an outline of the discourse that connects the securitization of Pacific engagement with climate change. It then examines the NZ Government's responses to climate diplomacy between the South Pacific Islands and Global South powers. This is considered alongside an assessment of NZ's own climate diplomacy. The paper draws on analysis of primary documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade website, documents from government websites of relevant Pacific state, NGO reports, as well as secondary literature.

Sesson 3: Local Climate Change Policy and Politics

Climate change in the neighbourhood: Climate emergency declarations and local government elections in Aotearoa New Zealand

Tom Jamieson and Sam Crawley (*Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington*)

Despite increased national and international attention to addressing the causes of climate change and reducing its effects, cities and regions continue to lead on climate action. However, less remains known about how climate action and candidates' positions on climate action influence their chances of electoral success in local body elections. In this paper, we seek to bridge this gap through analysis of a novel dataset analysing climate emergency declarations, candidates' policy positions, and election results for candidates in the 2019 local body elections in Aotearoa New Zealand. The results suggest that declared climate emergencies did not harm incumbents' re-election prospects, and this climate action may have benefited incumbents, especially in elections for unitary authorities. The results suggest climate change can be a winning policy in local elections, but further work is necessary to understand the extent to which these results might generalize to other places, settings, and times.

Exploring transformative governance: Investigating climate change responses in two local governments in Aotearoa New Zealand

Gangadari Ranawaka, Karen Hytten, Diane Pearson (*Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa - Massey University*), Florentine van Noppen (*Bioeconomy Science Institute*) and Anna Berka

As pressure to mitigate emissions and adapt to climate risks continues to mount, local governments around the world are playing an increasingly important role in climate change governance. This paper explores climate change policies and practices in two local governments to understand the extent to which transformative climate change governance is practiced in Aotearoa New Zealand. Policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand current climate change responses, institutional mechanisms and perceptions of key actors within two local councils. It was found that while both councils' policy documents promote "building low-carbon economies" and "promoting circularity", practical measures to reduce emissions are largely limited to the transport and waste sectors. At the same time, financial constraints and changes in policy settings continue to constrain the scope and effectiveness of climate change responses. Hölscher's (2019) framework for transformative climate governance will be used to assess and compare the nature of each council's capacities for transformative climate governance and identify opportunities for contributing towards transformative change within local governments in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Policy failure and political inertia: Exploring the barriers constraining community responses to climate disasters in Aotearoa New Zealand

Karen Hytten (*Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa - Massey University*), Jen Pannell and Lauren Bland (*Environment Hubs Aotearoa*)

During early 2023, the Auckland Anniversary Weekend Floods and Cyclone Gabrielle devastated communities across Tāmaki Makarau Auckland, Te Matau-a-Māui Hawke's Bay, and Te Tairāwhiti Gisborne. While several government inquiries have documented systemic failures in the institutional responses to these events, less attention has been given to understanding the

community-based responses that played a crucial role and filled critical gaps during and after these events. This paper draws upon the findings of an online survey, focus group and in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, to identify and explore key challenges and barriers facing community responders. We found that a series of policy failures associated with changes in emergency management in Auckland following the establishment of Auckland Council in 2010, changes to health and safety legislation in 2014, and the centralisation of civil defence operations in Hawkes Bay, severely impacted the capacity of many community resilience groups with significant implications for local communities' preparedness for extreme weather events. These failures, combined with limited information, poor communication, a lack of coordination, excessive bureaucracy, inadequate resources and challenges associated with infrastructure, hindered individuals' and organisations' efforts to meet community needs.

Session 4: Social Movements and Climate Activism

Strategic logics for climate action: Evidence from a New Zealand study

Jonathan Oosterman (*Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington*)

Processes of strategic decision-making are central to understanding climate action. To advance this understanding, this article draws on the social movement strategy literature, aligning with its recent turn toward agency. Addressing calls for approaches that theorise strategy and 'develop a larger synthetic understanding of [strategic] choices' (Meyer and Staggenborg 2012, 6), it introduces a framework of strategic logics – beliefs about social change that underpin decision-making and constitute the 'ideational content' of strategic action. Three primary strategic logics – enactment, communication, and confrontation – are analysed through empirical research on climate action in Aotearoa New Zealand, including a national survey (n = 797) and sixteen focus groups. In terms of the logic of enactment, the article explores the embodiment of values in self-transformation and relationality, including the roles ethical consumption is perceived to play in social transformation. Regarding the logic of communication, it considers the variety of targets for messaging and situates 'action requests' in relation to a 'ladder of engagement'. For the logic of confrontation, the article examines issues of visibility, the goal of imposing social costs on governments and businesses, and the interplay between public opinion and confrontational protest. Finally, it discusses how these strategic logics interact and combine in an 'ecosystem of climate action'.

Climate Rebellion? The rise and decline of Extinction Rebellion Aotearoa New Zealand

Kyle R. Matthews (*Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington*) and Sophie Bond (*Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka - University of Otago*)

In early 2019 chapters of Extinction Rebellion (XR), a radical climate activist movement from the UK, began popping up in Aotearoa New Zealand. XR provided individuals concerned about a lack of action in the face of the climate crisis with a relatively simple answer to create change: mass grassroots disruptive protest to force the government to accede to three demands. Over the coming year, 27 chapters appeared and came together in a National Day of Action that shut down a central Wellington street with over 40 activists arrested. By late 2020 the government had, in response to XR and other movements, given in to much of the first demand by declaring a climate emergency. However, over the following years the movement faded, and by 2025 only one chapter remained active, with several others barely functioning as digital ghosts of their previous selves.

Others had morphed into or merged with the newer organisation Climate Liberation Aotearoa. In this article we interrogate XR's legacy by highlighting some of its successes and challenges, examine what it means when groups morph into alternatives, and ask what XR tells us about the potential for radical climate activism in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Governance gaps and emerging community responses

Catherine Dyer, Gerhard Reese, Sophie Jerram (*Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington*) and Hinemoa Katene (*Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa - Massey University*)

New Zealand climate policy has never delivered action that is proportionate to the scale of the issue but has become increasingly incoherent in recent times. The catastrophe of a years-long pandemic followed by a cost-of-living crisis has had widespread impact on voter disposition. The long-term and abstract nature of climate change mitigation, with its complex offsetting accountancy and regular international talk-fest summits does not resonate with people's day-to-day concerns. This disconnect and resulting dispositional ambivalence is reflected in the outcomes of political contests internationally, raising the spectre of derailment from cooperative climate action. In mid-2025, we collaborated on a project called Critical Signals. Critical Signals provided a public space to which the community was invited to explore practical and visionary responses to an era of collapses, with a focus on kai and data sovereignty, collective resilience, and adaptation strategies under a rapidly changing climate. Many of the participants expressed deep anxiety about the future and the lack of venues for sharing concerns and connecting with others. In 2026, Critical Signals will re-open another three-month public space, with international offshoots and a new focus – proposals for which include energy and democracy. In this article, we will explore the role of complex systems and spatial commoning approaches to generating community-led responses to climate change, based on our experiences with the Critical Signals project. We consider the potential for community-based approaches to seed social and political transformations more broadly. Do voter dispositions shift to supporting stronger policy action when communities connect on complex issues like climate change?