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Councils struggling with sea level risk

"Whole communities may need to be moved"

Government intervention and legislation is likely to be called for as local councils struggle to adapt to climate change consequences including rising sea levels. The role was given to them by government, which retained responsibility for mitigating the country's green house gas emissions.



JAY BOREHAM

There are ongoing erosion issues at Orewa beach following storm events.

Uncertainty on a timeline for sea level rises, including the impacts of melting ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland will continue. But, as more research reports come in, 1.25 metre levels by 2100 look likely, professor Martin Manning of the Climate Research Institute at Victoria University says.

Councils should be looking at 2 metre rises by 2100, for risk management, he says. Most councils are looking at one metre.

Councils have a statutory duty to use information about natural hazards, like sea level rise, and may be found liable for damages or loss if it doesn't use the best information available. But those that do risk community backlash and challenges through the courts. So councils have taken the lower end of possible sea level rises into account for regulations as they are easier to defend in court.

This has seen piecemeal standards around the country for building regulations and zoning, leaving much of the country under-protected from sea level rise and storm inundation extremes, including agricultural and horticultural areas.

Auckland Council has mapped the city's 3100 kilometres of coastline using laser Lidar mapping. Costs have seen many other councils, like Northland Regional Council, only Lidar mapping residential coastal villages and known flood zones.

Climate Change Minister Paula Bennett says it was a matter for councils and insurers to decide what areas could be built on. The Ministry for the Environment is updating best practice planning guidance for climate change impacts.

North Auckland will face the worst flooding in the Auckland region with Orewa beach township the first area facing significant and immediate issues.

Low lying communities including Waiwera, Whangateau, Pt Wells and the Omaha flats in the north are also likely to see serious inundation. The biggest area by far in the Auckland region will be rural areas along the Kaipara River area south of Helensville.

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