Te Āhua o te Taiao
State of the Environment Report 2025

October 2026

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Ngā mihi | Acknowledgements

The development of this State of the Environment Report has been a team effort by the staff of the Marlborough District Council. It is the result of years of monitoring, data collection, analysis and reporting. Thanks must go to all of those who contributed to the creation of this report, including current and past staff members who have undertaken monitoring on the state of Marlborough's environment for many years, enabling long term trends and changes over time to be analysed.

Thanks must also go to iwi and the external organisations who have contributed information towards the report, and to Ruihana Smith for the illustrations of ngā Atua Māori.

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Ko ahau te taiao, ko te taiao ko ahau
I am the environment, and the environment is me

Marlborough is home to lowland forests, towering scree slopes and a coastline rich in ecological and cultural significance. This diverse environment, and the communities within it, are interconnected ki uta ki tai (mountains to sea). This State of the Environment Report (SoE) delves into the key pressures facing our district, Council's response to these pressures, and the resulting outcomes backed by a robust environmental monitoring programme.



The report documents the past decade, and what's changed since 2015 across freshwater, the marine environment and nautical safety, land, air, infrastructure, natural hazards, and our changing climate. It's the latest report in its series, stretching back to 1994, summarising the outcomes of Council's environmental policies, monitoring and activities.

The past decade has seen emerging issues for our environment in Marlborough, which are highlighted as new areas of focus in this year's report. These include the importance of biodiversity, a catchment-wide lens to improving freshwater, and natural hazards relating to climate change. Meanwhile, over this period, the Marlborough Environment Plan (MEP) became largely operative. This consolidated the district's three management plans for the region into one comprehensive roadmap for environmental planning and management.

The MEP is the product of more than a decade of work with extensive collaboration among iwi, industry and the community. Iwi management plans have served as kaitiaki tools, outlining mana whenua relationships with land, water and significant places, which detail how these are to be protected for future generations. Additionally, our natural environment is intrinsically tied to industry and our communities' livelihoods—from farming, forestry and aquaculture to wine and tourism. The MEP provides clear direction for sustainable development while protecting our district's unique natural and cultural environments.

As nature is constantly changing, so are the complex national policies that guide environmental planning at a local level. As of this writing, reforms are still underway to replace the Resource Management Act with two acts — one to manage environmental impacts from human activities and another to enable development and infrastructure. This report places Council in an informed position to understand the district's key issues in relation to these reforms as they continue to unfold.

We encourage the community to look at the contents of this latest report and to use it as a valuable resource for information and decision-making, now and into the future. At Council, we'll use the report:

- as a baseline for environmental monitoring,
- to inform long term planning, and
- to gauge whether past management efforts have been successful.

There is no question that Marlborough faces challenges ahead. As the impacts of climate change intensify, so do the risks of natural hazards. Our flora and fauna—some of which is found nowhere else in the world—has suffered from centuries of human activity, particularly the introduction of pest plants and animals. But these challenges present opportunities. With respect to climate change, there's further opportunity for Council to map hazards, plan infrastructure, and foster community involvement to build long-term resilience across the region. With biodiversity, Council will soon prepare its first biodiversity strategy, with a focus on fostering community-led stewardship to protect our unique ecosystems.

The achievements highlighted in this report represent the hard work of Council staff, and many organisations and individuals. Working together is at the heart of improving environmental outcomes for all of Marlborough, among the community, mana whenua, industry, and other agencies. From freshwater improvements with local farmers to controlling wilding conifers with grassroots community groups, none of these initiatives are possible without your participation. In this report, you'll find ways to 'play your part' at home and in the community.

We are all in this, together.

Ngā mihi nui,

Mayor Nadine Taylor & Clr Barbara Faulls



Nadine Taylor

Mayor

Marlborough District Council



Barbara Faulls

Chair, Environment & Planning Committee

Marlborough District Council



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Te whakatakoto i te horopaki
Setting the scene

Te ao Māori

The whenua of Marlborough, now shaped by modern land use, still bears the remnants of Te Wao Nui-a-Tāne, the native forests, and the enduring domains of Tangaroa and Hinemoana in its coastal and marine areas.

Ngā Atua are collectively present as the primordial forces of nature across their respective environments, reminding us that they are not merely resources to be used but a living system of interwoven relationships based on reciprocity, respect and mana. 'Ki uta ki tai', from the mountains to the sea, the way in which the taiao is viewed is all-encompassing, with the understanding that effects from the mountain ranges extend to the moana, which serves as the receiving environment.

Taunahanaha whenua is the process of naming, in which the whakapapa of tangata whenua was embedded in the landscape from times beyond memory. The names of these features record the names of significant ancestors, their deeds and the resources they discovered.

For tangata whenua, the whenua of Marlborough continues to offer sustenance and whakapapa connections. This relationship with the taiao is not limited to recreation; it also encompasses tikanga and cultural practices such as resource gathering, kai harvesting and the collection of cultural materials, all of which are key to livelihoods, identity and cultural revitalisation.

These practices are carried out in balance with the taiao and guided by kaitiakitanga – the reciprocal relationship to care for and sustain the environment, as we rely on the environment to sustain us in turn.



Looking over Blenheim from Orchard Spur



Limestone formation, Brian Boru covenant

Marlborough's environment

Marlborough is home to diverse natural landscapes, from islands formed by drowned river valleys of the last ice age to braided rivers, lagoons, fertile plains, rugged hill country and a remarkable limestone coastline.

At the same time, the district supports road networks, infrastructure, forestry, aquaculture, more than 70% of the country's vineyards and the largest farm in Aotearoa New Zealand. These contrasts — and the living systems within them — are at the heart of this report.

While human activity has shaped much of the landscape that we know today, Marlborough's ecosystems and biodiversity are as varied as its terrain. The district is a hotspot of endemism, meaning many plant and animal species are found nowhere else on earth. It's also part of a global ecosystem, where migratory birds from as far away as Siberia rest and feed on Marlborough's East Coast before embarking on another journey to the northern hemisphere.

Marlborough's living systems aren't just about plants and animals – they're about people. Wairau Bar, or Te Pokohiwi / Boulder Bank, is one of the earliest known human settlement sites in New Zealand. By the time Captain Cook arrived a few centuries later, the Marlborough landscape and its biodiversity had already undergone dramatic change. What Cook encountered was a land already shaped by human hands – resilient, resourceful and ever-evolving. Yet those changes to the landscape and biodiversity were negligible compared with what was to come, including the introduction of ungulates (hoofed mammals like goats and deer) and mustelids (ferrets, stoats, weasels) and the clearing of erosion-prone hillsides for farmland.

While many of today's environmental challenges stem from historical factors – societal norms of the time, industries of a bygone era and uncontrolled pathways for pests – Marlborough can still address complex environmental issues differently for future generations. Today, farmers, iwi, scientists, Council and community groups are increasingly working together to understand their shared values, co-create solutions and solve problems. Grassroots restoration trusts are emerging as incubators that integrate traditional knowledge with cutting-edge science. Te Hoiere Project has become an exemplar in New Zealand with international recognition of what can be achieved when Government, Council, mana whenua and the community come together.

Human activity will continue to shape Marlborough's landscape into the future, and this report provides foundational information for this decision-making.

Safeguarding the health of our environment not only protects nature, it also provides the foundation for a resilient community within it where people can live, work and thrive.

Marlborough's geography

The region's mountain ranges and river valleys were formed 25 million years ago when the Pacific and Indo-Australian tectonic plates collided, resulting in two distinct geographical areas: the Marlborough Sounds to the north and the Wairau and Awatere valleys to the south.

Over millions of years, tectonic plates, sea-level changes, glaciers and rivers have shaped the Marlborough we know today. These forces, alongside human activity and an increasingly volatile climate, are continuing to shape the Marlborough of tomorrow.

At the northern edge of the district, the Marlborough Sounds form a labyrinth of drowned river valleys that form sheltered inlets hugged by steep forested hills. Many of these hills were once cleared in an attempt to create farmland. In many cases, nature prevailed, and the land has since regenerated into native forest. To the south of the Marlborough Sounds, the landscape changes dramatically – both on land and on the coast.

Marlborough's distinctive East Coast extends from Waikutakuta / Robin Hood Bay in the north to Willawa Point near Kekerengu in the south. The Wairau Lagoons are ecologically and internationally important as a fish nursery and a feeding ground for migrating birds. Further south, dramatic limestone outcrops are home to rare species. Along the eastern coast of Marlborough, the Wairau and Awatere rivers flow out to the Pacific Ocean, depositing the stone and soils that built up the valleys' fertile plains.

The lower Wairau Plains were once a large expanse of wetlands. Early European settlers began draining the wetlands for farming. Today, little remains of these delicate ecosystems. Instead, extensive flood management and drainage systems have created productive land used for farming and viticulture, and enabled development of the Blenheim urban area. In contrast, the intensively managed river plains of lowland Marlborough are a stark contrast to the Awatere Valley, which is home to dryland hills and isolated high-country farms. Towering above it all is Tapuae-o-Uenuku, the highest peak outside the Southern Alps. This Marlborough high country is home to introduced unique flora and fauna, numerous bluffs and scree slopes with introduced ungulates.

Just as the terrain differs across Marlborough, so do its freshwater systems and pressures from human activities. Marlborough relies on water for farming, viticulture,

industry, recreation and urban uses, such as gardening and drinking water. But from the high-country streams and braided rivers of the valleys to underground aquifers and delicate estuaries, these interconnected freshwater systems are not solely for humans. Council has a responsibility to protect freshwater and marine environments that are home to plants, fish, birds, insects and other organisms.

The mounting pressures on the health of Marlborough's land, water and coastlines are happening against the backdrop of a changing climate and unpredictable seismic activity. These risks and hazards highlight the importance of community resilience and preparing for future events.

About this report

This report is the latest in a series of State of the Environment reports stretching back to 1994. It represents a comprehensive view of the health of Marlborough's freshwater, air, land and marine environments.

Since the last report was published in 2015, there are three emerging areas influencing the lens of environmental management in Marlborough. These topics – integrated catchment management, climate and natural hazards, and biodiversity – are new areas of focus in this year's report.

- Catchment management practices recognise that the elements of an ecosystem, including its people, are connected ki uta ki tai, from the mountains to the sea. The focus for Marlborough has been hillside erosion and freshwater quality in at-risk catchments. Council has been working alongside proactive communities to improve land management practices, such as planting trees on hillsides and waterways, and fencing to exclude stock from freshwater corridors.
- The risk of natural hazards in Marlborough is increasing as the impacts of climate change intensify. Council has modelled climate change and rising sea levels for the region, both of which are publicly available. More work is needed on hazard mapping, infrastructure planning and community participation to build long-term resilience across the region.
- Council will shortly prepare its first biodiversity strategy, with a focus on Marlborough's unique ecosystems. The strategy will aim to protect, restore and enhance the region's biodiversity while fostering community-led stewardship and resilience. The management of native flora and fauna habitat through pest management strategies and habitat protection has been a local government responsibility, while Central Government has been responsible for protecting native species.

This report, and much of the work in it, fulfils Council's responsibilities under the Resource Management Act (RMA), which is undergoing reform as of this publication. This report also feeds into Council's foundational planning documents, the Long-Term Plan (LTP) and Marlborough Environment Plan (MEP), to measure community and environmental outcomes. The Long-Term Plan is a requirement under the Local Government Act to plan budgets and to monitor and report on community outcomes in rolling 10-year cycles. The MEP, required by the RMA, sets out how individuals, businesses and the wider community may use public resources, as well as what people may do on private land. It includes policies, using both regulatory and non-regulatory means, to achieve these goals. The MEP was first publicly notified for submission to the public in 2016 and is largely operative today. Since the last State of the Environment report, the MEP has replaced a 1995 Regional Policy Statement and two regional resource management plans with a single resource management plan.

Using This Report

This report may be used by the community to learn about the local environment or to inform policymakers and other stakeholders about environmental outcomes.

Its primary use, however, is to help Council identify root causes and address trends affecting the environment. This information guides planning decisions that balance environmental protection with the needs of the community now and into the future. This year's report will also serve as baseline data for Council's first biodiversity strategy, and a snapshot of environment health as Council navigates Government reforms still unfolding in the resource management space.

It's important to note that although this synthesised State of the Environment report is not published annually, much of the monitoring and scientific data within it is, and these reports are available on the Council's website. Examples of Council's annual reporting include quality monitoring for recreational water, groundwater, air and soil. In addition to State of the Environment monitoring to track trends, Council also undertakes compliance monitoring as required by law.



Figure 1: The Plan, Do, Monitor, Review cycle

Compliance monitoring is undertaken on a variety of activities and industries to ensure compliance with the MEP and resource consents. The priority is on compliance issues that have a greater environmental impact, generate community concern or are related to trends highlighted through the State of the Environment report. Certain activities permitted in the MEP rules are also monitored annually, such as the discharge to land of dairy effluent or winery wastewater. Compliance monitoring provides feedback for policy effectiveness, resource consents, and science and monitoring groups.

The research and monitoring detailed in this report are used to ensure Council's planning decisions are well-supported with evidence and facts. Monitoring contributes to the continuous improvement of existing plans and the development of new plans through the Plan, Do, Monitor Review cycle (Figure 1). While science-backed evidence is key for policy review and development, community participation is also crucial. This report serves as a public record and shared reality of the state of the environment for the Marlborough community.

Ngā meka matua
Key facts

Environmental monitoring

Over a century ago, the earliest environmental data held by Council were collected by residents and included daily rainfall totals, as well as estimates and timings of river flows and floods.

Today, Council collects samples of water, air and soil from over 200 sites, both manually and using automated sensor technology. Since the 2015 State of the Environment report, Council has adopted the National Environmental Monitoring Standards (NEMS), an international best practice to guide the way environmental data is collected, processed and stored.

Monitored sites are chosen to provide representative data on different aspects of the environment. For example, air monitoring is conducted at two strategic sites using advanced sampling technology to ensure a continuous record of conditions.

Meanwhile, river quality is based on 55 routine monitoring sites across the region, and soil samples provide an annual perspective on the impacts of agriculture at 123 sites.

Data is shared on Council's website, on Land, Air, Water Aotearoa (LAWA) and with various stakeholders, such as Marlborough Emergency Management. Since the adoption of NEMS, this has ensured consistency in the collection and handling of environmental data across agencies throughout New Zealand. Data is regularly provided to consultants, research organisations, industry and the community. For example, river water-level data can be used by engineers to determine bridge or road heights.

Monitoring is conducted through a combination of manual and automated methods. Field staff collect samples for analysis of waterborne contaminants, such as Escherichia coli (*E. Coli*), while remote monitoring stations continuously record and transmit environmental data for real-time assessment. Remote monitoring stations record measurements such as rainfall (Figure 2), water level (Figure 3), water temperature, conductivity, air temperature and air quality. This equipment requires regular inspection and maintenance to ensure accuracy and extend its service life. The time required at each site varies, as some remote monitoring locations have five or more sensors, whereas others have only one. Additionally, some sensors need monthly checks, whereas others require servicing only quarterly or annually. On average, the environmental monitoring team collects 1,800 samples per year and conducts 1,300 checks on remote measurement sensors.



Figure 2: Performing a sensor check at a remote rainfall monitoring site



Figure 3: Performing a spot flow measurement at a remote water level site

Future environment

Since the last report was published in 2015, New Zealand has experienced profound legislative changes impacting the core responsibilities of local governments.

From ownership of infrastructure to managing public resources and protecting biodiversity, political shifts in the past decade have changed the work of councils. By 2020, unprecedented Government funding on nature-based projects was announced in the wake of COVID-19 to stimulate the economy. In Marlborough, Central Government funding accelerated the fight against wilding conifers, enabled native tree planting, provided support for landowners to make changes that improve freshwater quality and much more. The future of this environmental funding remains uncertain amid reforms to resource management. This uncertainty not only affects Council's statutory work in planning, monitoring and compliance, but also proactive restoration work with the community.

Marlborough is a unitary council, performing the functions of both a regional council and a territorial authority, and will continue to do so. This management is delivered through a single set of processes rather than the more traditional two-tier system of local government. In the face of legislative uncertainty, Council is well-placed to integrate new policies in the management of natural and physical resources.

An environment that not only functions, but thrives, is the foundation for community well-being. Healthy natural environments support industry and recreation, while providing food, water, clean air, and the ability for nature to sustain itself and keep providing for future generations.



Awatere River mouth


Ngāti Rārua, Ngāti Toa, Ngāi Tahu, Rangitāne, Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Tama, Ngāti Apa, Ngāti Kōata, Ngāti Kuia,
Ngāti Kuia, Ngāti Rārua, Ngāti Toa, Ngāi Tahu, Rangitāne, Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Tama, Ngāti Apa, Ngāti Kōata, Ngāti

Ngā iwi nō Wairau
Marlborough's tangata whenua iwi

Nine iwi have interests in Marlborough: Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō, Ngāti Kōata, Ngāti Kuia, Ngāti Rārua, Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Ngāi Tahu (Kati Kuri), Rangitāne o Wairau, Te Ātiawa o Te Waka-a-Māui and Ngāti Tama ki Te Tauihu.

All have unique histories, whakapapa, aspirations and connections to the whenua of Te Tauihu o te Waka-a-Māui. Information on an individual iwi history and the relationship of each iwi with the Marlborough environment can be found in iwi management plans and the relevant Deeds of Settlement.

- Ngāi Tahu were settled in the 1990s, culminating in the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998.
- The settlements for Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō, Ngāti Kuia and Rangitāne o Wairau are set out in the Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō, Ngāti Kuia, and Rangitāne o Wairau Claims Settlement Act 2014.
- The settlements for Ngāti Kōata, Ngāti Rārua, Ngāti Tama and Te Ātiawa o Te Waka-a-Māui are set out in the Ngāti Kōata, Ngāti Rārua, Ngāti Tama ki Te Tau Ihu, and Te Ātiawa o Te Waka-a-Māui Claims Settlement Act 2014.
- The settlement for Ngāti Toa is set out in the Ngati Toa Rangatira Claims Settlement Act 2014.

Marlborough, as a designated place, was a construct imposed upon iwi following European settlement and was not traditionally known by tangata whenua / mana whenua. For iwi, many places exist within the Marlborough district and they include (but are not limited to) Wairau, Te Hoiere / Pelorus, Totaranui / Queen Charlotte Sound, Whanganui (Port Underwood), Whangarae, Awatere and Rangitoto (D'Urville Island).

Te Tauihu iwi and Ngāi Tahu pursued claims against the Crown for historic breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The Waitangi Tribunal claims for Te Tauihu iwi resulted in Deeds of Settlement, which provided historical accounts and apologies from the Crown, along with cultural, commercial and financial redress. However, the total redress amounted to less than 2% of the actual value lost. A Deed of Settlement for Ngāi Tahu was signed at Kaikōura on 21 November 1997, and the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act passed on 29 September 1998. Ngāi Tahu received cultural, tribal redress, an apology from the Crown, acknowledgement of the role of taonga Aoraki and financial redress.

Cultural redress included statutory acknowledgements. A statutory acknowledgement is a legal recognition of an iwi's cultural, spiritual, historical and traditional association with an identified area. It strengthens iwi participation in RMA processes by requiring councils to notify iwi of relevant consent applications and consider this relationship in decision-making.

Statutory acknowledgements are available online via Marlborough District Council's Smart Maps.

Iwi of Te Tauihu are kaitiaki; this is not an acquired role, but a responsibility gifted by whakapapa and handed down intergenerationally. Kaitiakitanga is a crucial part of the reciprocal relationship between tangata whenua and the taiao. Each iwi is at a different stage of developing its environmental management plans (Iwi Management Plans), which serve as kaitiaki instruments. These plans outline iwi relationships with land, water and significant places, and specify how these are to be protected, maintained and enhanced.

Current iwi management/environmental plans

Iwi / Entity	Name of Plan / Strategy	Year / Status
Multi-iwi / regional	Te Tau Ihu Mahi Tuna Eel / Tuna Management Plan	2000
Ngāti Kōata	Ngāti Kōata No Rangitoto ki te Tonga Trust Iwi Management Plan	2002 (currently being revised)
Kāti Kuri / Te Rūnanga o Kaikōura	Te Poha o Tohu Raumati Environmental Management Plan	First published: 2005 Second edition: 2007
Te Ātiawa o Te Waka-a-Māui	Te Ātiawa Iwi Environmental Management Plan	2014
Ngāti Kuia	Pakohe Management Plan	2015
Ngāti Tama	Ngāti Tama Ki Te Waipounamu Trust Environmental Management Plan	2018
Ngāti Rārua	Poipoia Te Ao Tūroa Environmental Strategy/ Iwi Management Plan	2021
Te Rūnanga a Rangitāne o Wairau	Te Aropipi Taiao Strategy & Iwi Taiao Management Plan	2025
Ngāti Kuia	Ngā Kanohi Kārearea Iwi Environmental Management Plan	2025

Te Tauihu Iwi and Councils' partnership agreement

Iwi and councils in Te Tauihu o te Waka-a-Māui / Top of the South Island signed a historic partnership agreement in 2023.

The Together Te Tauihu agreement was signed in Whakatū / Nelson on 12 December 2023 by the chairs of the eight tangata whenua iwi of Te Tauihu o te Waka-a-Māui and the mayors of Tasman, Nelson and Marlborough. Together Te Tauihu sets out various partnership principles as well as review mechanisms and can be found on Council's website.



Signing of Together Te Tauihu partnership agreement in 2023
Credit Melissa Banks Photographer

Iwi cultural monitoring tools

Iwi cultural monitoring tools are frameworks developed by iwi to assess the health of environments through a mātauranga Māori lens.

They sit alongside scientific monitoring guided by mātauranga Māori - traditional Māori knowledge and values - and measure the tangible and the intangible. This includes mauri, mana, cultural usability, and intergenerational continuity.

These monitoring tools can measure the effectiveness of restoration overtime and answer questions like:

- Is this awa in a healthy or degraded state?
- Can kai be gathered from a location safely?
- Does this place still hold its mana?
- Are tikanga and traditional practices still able to be practised here?

In Te Tauihu, iwi have developed and continue to refine cultural monitoring tools that support the integration of iwi values and mātauranga Māori into resource management and environmental management processes. These tools provide mātauranga-based frameworks for assessing environmental health, informing planning and consenting decisions, guiding restoration priorities and monitoring the effectiveness of management actions. They ensure iwi perspectives are embedded in decision-making and that environmental outcomes align with cultural values and aspirations.

One such example is Te Kupenga ā Kuia, a framework developed by Ngāti Kuia with support from Our Land and Water, to assess the mauri of restoration efforts in Te Hoiere / Pelorus, especially Ruapaka Wetland. Te Kupenga ā Kuia Mauri Assessment and Monitoring Tool aims to provide a unique Ngāti Kuia perspective on the health of the taiao, enabling tangata whenua to record and monitor changes over time and track the effectiveness of restoration efforts. Ngāti Kuia has trialled monitoring techniques that may complement Te Kupenga ā Kuia, including the use of eDNA tests to trace the presence of species in the water. Testing has shown the presence of dwarf galaxias, shortfin tuna, inanga and grey teal. Ngāti Kuia have used the same methods in the Whakamarino (Wakamarina) as well, showing the presence of various taonga species which builds a baseline knowledge of each wai.

Restoration projects

A diverse range of restoration projects are being undertaken by iwi across the district. Some examples include, but are not limited to:

Horahora Kākahu Island in Te Whanganui / Port Underwood is a historic reserve with title vested in local iwi, Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Rangitāne o Wairau and Ngāti Rārua following its return through Treaty settlement. The island was the site of the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi by local chiefs at nearby Kākāpō Bay on 17 June 1840. Te Rūnanga o Toa Rangatira, Rangitāne o Wairau, and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Rārua, in collaboration with the Marlborough Sounds Restoration Trust, have focused on removing wilding conifers and other invasive plant species and plans are now underway for supplementary native planting to restore a healthy ngahere (bush). Supported by Department of Conservation (DoC) funding and guided by ecological expertise, the project also aims to involve rangatahi and strengthen kaitiakitanga, ensuring the island can thrive as a haven for native wildlife into the future.

Elaine Bay in the Marlborough Sounds is part of Ngāti Toa Rangatira cultural redress sites. Under DoC Treaty Implementation Funding, and in partnership with the Marlborough Sounds Restoration Trust, Ngāti Toa Rangatira is removing wilding conifers and other invasive plant species to allow the native ngahere to regenerate, support biodiversity and protect the cultural and environmental values for future generations.

Lake Moawhitu and its associated wetland on Rangitoto ki te Tonga/D'Urville Island is a critical site for the iwi and its health reflects the mana of the iwi. Ngāti Koata has been working with a variety of partners and funders including DoC and the Council to restore the site. The programme aims to restore the taiao, as well as the mana of the iwi by restoring its connection to this place. The work has involved catchment revegetation and planting of 150,000 plants around the lake which complements natural regeneration, rewetting the wetland which has rapidly restored its vegetation, and monitoring of water quality, aquatic vegetation, fish and wildlife including tuna and pekapeka (bats). Both scientific and cultural health monitoring have shown slow improvements to the health of the freshwater environment, with restoration of cultural practices also occurring.

Ngā tāngata o Wairau me te ōhanga
Marlborough's people and economy

Current population

At the time of the 2023 census, Marlborough's usually resident population was 49,431.

The 2025 estimate was 50,800 – an increase of 4,600 people from 2015, but a slight decrease on the previous year primarily due to international migration and fewer births than deaths (refer to Figure 1).

Marlborough's population is ageing, with the proportion of young people and those of working age slightly lower than in 2015.

In 2025, 59.3% of Marlborough's population was of working age (15-64yrs) and 16.1% were young people (0-14yrs). The biggest change over time has been the proportion of people 65 years and older – it was 24.4% in 2025, up from 21.2% in 2015 and higher than the New Zealand average of 16.9%.

Source of population growth

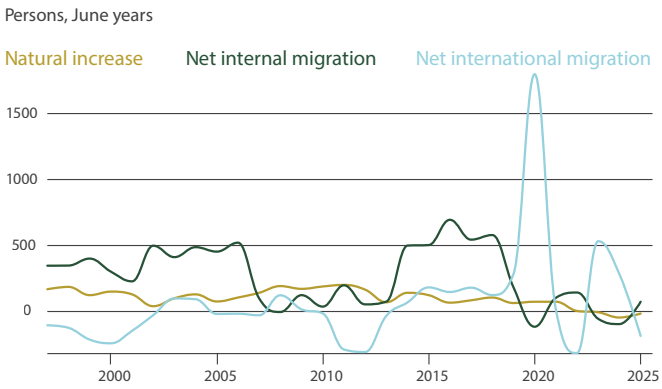


Figure 1: Source of Marlborough's population growth, trends over time (Infometrics regional profile).

Where we're from

19.5% of people living in Marlborough were born overseas, with England, Australia, South Africa and the Philippines being the most common country of birth.

Ethnic diversity

Ethnic group	Population count	% of total population*	Change since 2018
European	42,450	85.9%	↑ 2.1%
Māori	7,344	14.9%	↑ 16.2%
Asian	2,667	5.4%	↑ 38.8%
Pacific peoples	1,821	3.7%	↑ 24.4%
Melaa *(middle eastern/latin american/african)	738	1.5%	↑ 83.6%
Other	744	1.5%	↓ -3.5%

Figure 2: Ethnicity of people in Marlborough. Data is sourced from the 2023 census, showing Changes Since 2018. People may belong to more than one ethnic group.

Seasonal workforce

Marlborough employs about 6,000 seasonal workers annually, mainly in the wine industry, including those on the Recognised Seasonal Employment (RSE) scheme, backpackers, and holiday and temporary workers.

Most come from the Pacific Islands, East Asia, Europe and the Americas. They stay in various types of accommodation such as purpose-built seasonal worker accommodation, holiday accommodation, backpackers, residential homes and others.

Population projections

In the Statistics New Zealand medium projection, Marlborough's population is expected to grow modestly to about 55,500 by 2053, up 4,700 from 2023 (high projection: 62,800; low: 48,100). The average annual growth rate is 0.3%, with risks of zero or negative growth if migration slows. Natural increase (births minus deaths) is expected to be very low or negative, with deaths outnumbering births most of the time. Net migration, mainly from other parts of New Zealand and overseas, will be the primary driver of population growth.

Ageing population

The district's median age will rise from 45.4 years in 2023 to over 51 by 2053. The 65+ population will grow, while the proportion of children and working-age residents' decline. By 2053, seniors will outnumber those under 15, showing significant ageing.

Ethnic diversity

By 2053, Marlborough's population is projected to become more ethnically diverse, with Asian peoples increasing by 135%, Pacific by 98.6%, Māori by 58.4%, and the European or other (including New Zealander) population by 10.6%.

Youth and Workforce Trends

Marlborough's youth and working-age population is expected to stay flat or decline, impacting workforce and school enrolments, and placing greater strain on the working-age population.

Implications

Local services must adapt to an aging population, with fewer school-age children and increased demand for aged care and health services. The region's future depends on attracting migrants to offset natural decline and maintain economic and community vitality.

Settlements and housing

Most of Marlborough's population lives on or near the east coast, with about 60% of Marlborough's population living in the Blenheim urban area, 20% within 10 kilometres of Blenheim and 10% in Waikawa / Picton.

Home ownership in Marlborough is higher than the national average, with 74.1% of households owning their own home, compared with 66% nationwide.

Despite rising housing costs, home ownership remains relatively affordable, costing five times the average household income in Marlborough versus 6.5 times in New Zealand. This has improved since 2022, when home ownership cost 6.2 times the average household income in Marlborough, and 8.4 times in the rest of in New Zealand. Rent is also slightly more affordable in Marlborough, with weekly rent at 20.2% of income compared to 22.1% nationwide.

Council's 2025 Housing and Business Development Capacity Assessment notes that Marlborough's changing population will likely have an impact on the amount and type of housing needed into the future.



Marlborough Multicultural Festival

Economy

The Marlborough economy relies on agri-industries – viticulture, winemaking, forestry, farming, aquaculture and tourism. Supported by engineering, manufacturing, services, transport and retail, Marlborough's economy is diverse and interconnected; growth or decline in core sectors affects the whole region.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted both global and New Zealand economies, including Marlborough's. New Zealand experienced months of lockdown, but essential services like food and beverage production continued, allowing Marlborough's aquaculture and wine industries to continue harvesting and processing products. However, supply chains, transport and distribution were severely disrupted. Marlborough, heavily reliant on export markets, had to quickly adapt to new logistics and export challenges.

In 2025, Marlborough's economy primarily relies on wine production, viticulture, aquaculture and forestry. It leads New Zealand with 80% of exported wine and 60% of aquaculture products, such as salmon, mussels and oysters, from the Marlborough Sounds. Other significant primary industries include tourism and the aviation industry.

In the year to March 2025, Marlborough's Gross Domestic Product was $3,794.2m compared with $3,299.7m in 2015.

Marlborough's main economic sectors are goods-producing industries, including food and beverage production, seafood processing, wood product manufacturing and metal product manufacturing. They have remained fairly steady, while other primary industries like agriculture, forestry and fishing, and other services have experienced good growth. The sector experiencing the highest growth in contribution to GDP since 2015 is high-value services (such as financial and insurance, professional, scientific and technical services), growing from $365.3m in 2015 to $496m in 2025 - an increase of 35%.

All industries in Marlborough are experiencing significant changes due to new technologies like robotics, drones, sensors and artificial intelligence (AI) entering wineries, vineyards and manufacturing sites. These advancements are pushing industries to boost productivity and alter processes.

Meanwhile, climate change and emissions have driven industries to adopt more sustainable practices, by addressing their carbon footprint, packaging, transport and biowaste. Their efforts aim to build resilient, sustainable industries for a thriving future with locally tailored solutions.

Industry cluster	GDP 2024 (2015)	Employment 2024 (2015)	Businesses 2024 (2015)
Grape growing and wine manufacturing	$785m ($621m)	3,027 (2,458)	753 (807)
Tourism	$214.8m ($244.4m)	2,547 (2,650)	Unknown
Aviation (including RNZAF Woodbourne)	$108.0m ($111m)	923 (976)	36 (51)
Aquaculture, seafood, fishing and processing	$120m ($117m)	982 (872)	183 (198)
Pastoral farming and meat processing	$97.6m ($64.8m)	756 (951)	507 (526)
Forestry and wood products manufacturing	$54.1m ($60.5m)	341 (342)	261 (312)

Figure 3: Marlborough Industries' economic metrics. Source: Infometrics Regional Economic Profile

Events

Marlborough is known for offering something for everyone – world-class wineries, aquaculture, forestry, tourism throughout the Marlborough Sounds, diverse landscapes, arts and culture, sports and a strong community.

Community events foster environmental stewardship and social resilience by connecting residents with local initiatives, sharing knowledge and encouraging sustainable practices. Activities like biodiversity workshops and cultural festivals build collective responsibility, pride and social networks, boosting volunteerism and awareness of environmental issues, while commercial events showcase Marlborough's natural assets, attract visitors, support local businesses, and promote sustainability through waste reduction and resource efficiency.

Council plays a key role, offering advisory services, planning support and funding through initiatives like the Community Events Fund and the Commercial Events Fund. It also promotes, regulates and encourages sustainable event practices.

Tourism

Tourism is a key contributor to Marlborough's economy and includes accommodation, food services, retail, arts, recreation and transport.

In 2024, tourism contributed $214.8m to the GDP and 5.6% of Marlborough's economic output, down from 7.4% in 2015. Since 2000, tourism growth averaged 3.2%, surpassing the national average of 2.6%, with a 20.2% increase in economic output in 2024 compared to 10.2% nationally. Employment in the tourism sector hit 2,547 in 2024, 8.5% of Marlborough's total jobs.

Natural attractions like the Marlborough Sounds, and wines and winery experiences, continue to draw domestic and international visitors to the district. Marlborough often forms part of an international traveller's wider itinerary, with most staying an average of two nights. International visitors are attracted to Marlborough's open spaces and varied landscapes, and account for around 40% of tourism spend during summer and 20% in winter.

Marlborough's visitor economy also relies on business travellers and events – local events like the Marlborough Wine & Food Festival and Garden Marlborough attract visitors to the region, while conferences are especially important during the winter 'off-season'.

The industry's growth depends on protecting natural environments and landscapes that visitors come to experience. Guided by the Destination Management Plan (2022), efforts focus on climate resilience, reducing the environmental impact of tourism, and working with operators and communities to grow tourism in an ethical and sustainable way with the environment at the heart of decision making.



Feast Marlborough 2018

Te panonitanga āhuarangi
Climate change

Climate change is one of the most complex environmental challenges Marlborough faces. The earth is in a period of rapid change driven by human greenhouse gas emissions made since the Industrial Revolution that began in the 18th century, which has raised atmospheric carbon dioxide to levels not observed in the past 800,000 years.

Although these ongoing greenhouse gas emissions will continue to warm the planet, potentially leading to severe economic and social consequences, the timing and magnitude of these physical impacts remain difficult to predict.

The uncertain nature of climate-related change creates a particularly challenging context for Council decision-making and environmental management. Upcoming changes to the RMA and the National Adaptation Framework are expected to shape New Zealand's response to the climate change challenge.

To date, Council's own response has focused on information collection to better understand the consequences of climate change in a local context, support informed decision-making and monitor early indicators of environmental change in Marlborough. These signals are often subtle and hard to detect, partly because existing monitoring and methods were originally designed for other purposes.

Envirolink and Council commissioned Earth Sciences NZ (formerly NIWA) to undertake a review of climate change projections and impacts for the Marlborough region. Using downscaled climate modelling, the 2021 Climate Change Projections and Impacts for Marlborough report highlights several clear trends for the region:

Temperature

Marlborough will become significantly warmer. By 2040, Marlborough's average annual temperature is projected to rise by 0.5–1.5°C, increasing further by 0.5–2.0°C under medium greenhouse gas concentrations or 2.0–3.5°C under high concentrations by 2090. Maximum temperatures are expected to increase more than minimum temperatures, resulting in more hot days and a larger day–night temperature range across the region.

Hot and Frost Days

Hot days (≥25°C) are expected to become much more common across Marlborough, with up to 15 additional hot days by 2040 and as many as 65 extra days by 2090 under high greenhouse gas concentrations. At the same time, frosts will become increasingly rare, with up to 20 fewer frost days by 2040 and 10–60 fewer days by 2090, particularly in inland and higher-elevation areas.

Rainfall and Extreme Events

Annual rainfall in Marlborough is projected to change only slightly by 2040, generally within ±5%, but seasonal differences become much stronger by 2090, with summer rainfall potentially decreasing by up to 20% and winter rainfall increasing by up to 40%. At the same time, extreme rainfall events are expected to intensify, particularly short-duration storms lasting 1–12 hours, increasing the risk of flash flooding and stormwater system impacts.

Drought

More frequent and more severe droughts are predicted, with the region's potential evapotranspiration deficit (PED), the difference between how much water could potentially be lost from the soil through evapotranspiration and how much is actually available, projected to increase by 50–150 mm by 2040 and up to 250 mm by 2090. These higher PED values signal greater soil moisture stress, reduced pasture growth and a likely increase in irrigation demand to maintain productive land uses.

Rivers and hydrology

Mean annual river flows are expected to stay stable or slightly increase in some northern catchments. Low flows decline significantly, with more than 50% reductions in many catchments by the late century, indicating reduced water availability during dry periods.

Sea-level rise

Marlborough has already experienced around 4 mm of sea-level rise per year since 1993, a rate slightly above the global average, and this ongoing rise is expected to make hightide flooding increasingly frequent. With a 650 mm rise, projected to occur sometime between 2070 and 2155, today's high spring tide level would be exceeded on every tide, even in the absence of storms.

The report also identified potential climate-change effects on key sectors:

- Agriculture and horticulture: Rising temperatures, drought and extreme rainfall are likely to affect crop quality, harvest timing, soil conditions and water availability. Some warmer-climate crops may become viable.
- Forestry: Increased plant productivity from atmospheric carbon dioxide may be offset by heightened fire risk, drought stress, erosion and pest pressures.
- Ecosystems: Higher temperatures, reduced cold periods, altered river flows, sea-level rise, and an increase in the incidence of invasive species and disease pose major risks to native biodiversity across land, freshwater and coastal ecosystems.
- Human health: Increased heatwaves, wildfires and flood events, water contamination risks, harmful algal blooms and mental health stressors are expected to increase, and sea-level rise is likely to increase the exposure of human infrastructure to extreme coastal flooding.



Smoke in the Wairau Valley from the Pigeon Valley Fire, 2019

Council's climate change response

Council's Policy Frameworks

The Marlborough Environment Plan (MEP) and the Climate Change Action Plan 2024/25 -2027/28 (CCAP) provide strategic frameworks for responding to climate change. Council's approach aligns with national direction, including the proposed National Adaptation Framework and the proposed Natural Hazards Decision Making Policy Statement, which emphasise risk identification, adaptation planning and investment transparency, MFE Guidance on Coastal Hazard and Climate Change, and NZ Coastal Policy Statement 2010.

The MEP acknowledges the scientific community's consensus that the world is getting warmer, causing its climate to change, and recognises the need for adaptive, precautionary and flexible planning. It outlines how Council manages the effects of climate change on the region's environment, economy and communities.

Two key objectives from the MEP guide Council's approach:

- Objective 6.1 – Mitigation and Adaptation: Reduce carbon emissions and promote offsetting, improve understanding of climate and ocean acidification impacts, enable primary industries to adapt through crop diversification and aquaculture changes, take a precautionary approach to freshwater allocation and coastal management, and recognise cumulative greenhouse gas emissions in consent decisions.
- Objective 6.2 – Natural Hazard Management: Monitor flood hazards and update planning overlays, apply sea-level rise allowances for different development types (1.52 m for new subdivisions/infrastructure, 1.0 m for existing development, and 0.65 m for short-lived, low-risk assets), and use Dynamic Adaptive Pathways Planning (DAPP) with community engagement to manage coastal risks.

The CCAP works in conjunction with the MEP and details how Council will respond to climate challenges through four strategic pillars:

- Information collection on climate change and its hazards
- Risk assessment on climate change consequences and implications
- Prioritisation, adaptation and resilience
- Emissions, waste and river management responses

This plan demonstrates regional leadership on climate and natural hazard issues and signals the need for Council to consider climate impacts on future business operations, including reviewing information to be collected and systems, processes, policies and procedures.

Information collection

Council's information collection, one of the pillars in the CCAP, takes a number of forms:

- Data and science: Robust data collection underpins informed decision-making. Council gathers technical information on key climate threats, including coastal and river flooding, and rising groundwater. Regional and site-specific data will inform the planning of dynamic adaptive pathways.
  Recording groundwater levels, salinity, tidal movement, rainfall, river flows, infrastructure pumping and coastal water quality provides a baseline for detecting long-term changes.
- Ecosystem resilience: Council is developing programmes to understand the impacts of climate change on coastal environments and to strengthen land-based biodiversity habitats and ecosystems against these changes. This work ensures Marlborough's natural assets remain resilient and continue to support the region's communities and economy. Council is also reviewing options to address increased biosecurity risks and pest management requirements driven by climate change.
- Coastal flooding and sea-level rise: Regional sea-level rise modelling covering 100% of Marlborough's coastline was completed in October 2023.
  New, more advanced computer models are now being used to understand flooding on the Lower Wairau Plain. These models are more accurate because they include how waves behave, how sediment moves and how tides travel inland. They test sea-level rise from 0.2 m up to 2.0 m for both everyday high tides and storm surges. The modelling shows that once sea level rises by about 1.5 m –1.6 m, current stop banks would be overtopped, leading to widespread flooding. Council has also surveyed beach profiles at nine sites, from the shoreline out to deeper water, to improve wave modelling and emergency planning.
- Flooding: A comprehensive review of the Wairau River flood protection scheme is underway, incorporating climate change scenarios for 2030, 2050 and 2130. Rainfall analysis from 2015–2024 shows potential increases in rainfall intensity. Flood frequency analysis for current conditions is complete; climate change scenario modelling is paused pending Council decisions.
- Geomorphic assessment: A 2025 Wairau River and Lagoon Geomorphic Assessment looked at how the Lower Wairau River and Wairau Lagoons might alter under the effects of climate change. It examined how river processes, coastal forces, land use, engineering structures and changing weather patterns shape the landscape. The river channel has narrowed by up to 56% since 1924 because of human changes, affecting how sediment moves and how floods spread. Rainfall is increasing in autumn but decreasing in spring and summer, and soils are staying wetter for longer, which may make floods worse. There are still gaps in understanding how sediment behaves in the lower river, and changes at the river mouth will influence future flows. If Te Pokohiwi / Boulder Bank is overtopped, it will significantly change water and sediment movement.
- Groundwater and infrastructure: Council is assessing how climate change and sea-level rise will affect groundwater in the Lower Wairau Plain. The groundwater model is being updated with new climate, geology and hydrology information to understand future groundwater levels, where groundwater may emerge at the surface and the risk of saltwater intrusion. Rising groundwater could damage pipes and other 'horizontal infrastructure'. Early investigations also show high levels of infiltration of groundwater into sewer and stormwater networks.

Future response

Council's future work programme focuses on embedding climate change considerations across all operational areas and undertaking targeted assessments of key vulnerabilities. Climate change scenarios will be systematically integrated into Council processes for infrastructure planning, consenting and strategic planning decisions to ensure climate resilience is built into future development.

Funding has been secured to conduct a Marlborough Climate Change Risk Assessment in 2026 to identify and integrate climate and natural hazard risks, thereby guiding long-term, region-specific resilience planning, investment and adaptation across Council functions and communities.

Several critical infrastructure assessments are planned or underway. The Taylor River stop bank and flood capacity will be evaluated to determine its adequacy under future climate conditions. Similarly, Blenheim's urban stormwater system will be assessed to understand its performance under projected rainfall intensities and patterns. In North Marlborough, Council will investigate how climate change will impact river flooding patterns, while across

the region major river systems will be studied to predict future behaviour of Marlborough's river catchments and associated risks.

Coastal and water-related hazards will receive significant attention. Both regional-scale and targeted assessments of coastal erosion and instability under future climate change conditions are planned. Council will also examine how climate change may exacerbate regional drought and wildfire risks, particularly in vulnerable areas. Future irrigation demand and freshwater allocation limits will be reassessed in light of changing rainfall patterns and water availability.

Underpinning this technical work is a commitment to building institutional knowledge and capacity. Council will continue developing its understanding of climate change and natural hazards, focusing on identifying emerging risks. A comprehensive risk assessment framework will be developed to answer critical questions about what risks exist, where they are located, and when they are likely to manifest. This foundation will enable Council to begin meaningful adaptation discussions with communities, including prioritised reduction measures and resilience-building initiatives.

Updated national climate projections have been released by the Ministry for the Environment in 2025, and these will be used to update projections at a downscaled regional level.

CHANGES SINCE 2015

A comprehensive policy and planning response to climate change has been developed.

- Priority information to be collected on climate change has been identified and is underway, including comprehensive sea-level rise modelling.
- Earth Sciences NZ research was commissioned and delivered in 2021 on climate change projections and impacts for Marlborough, complemented by Ministry for the Environment data in 2024 and 2025 on 20 climate change variables and projections based on future emissions scenarios.
- The National Emissions Reduction Plan and National Adaptation Plan were released in 2022.
- Emissions inventory reporting for financial years 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2023 is maintained.
- The National Adaptation Framework is in development.
- Ministry for the Environment guidance on Climate Change and Coastal Natural Hazards has been updated.
- Marlborough's Climate Change Action Plan was updated in 2024/2025. A progress report produced in August 2026 at the halfway point of the plan's implementation shows solid progress.



Rachel Range