
Northland Monitoring Forum

Membership Agreement

An agreement to establish an environmental information sharing forum across the Northland Region.

The Parties

Far North District Council
Kaipara District Council
Whangarei District Council
Northland Regional Council
Ministry for the Environment
Department of Conservation

Background

In 2001 the Northland Regional Council initiated a meeting between Northland councils and the Ministry for the Environment to discuss opportunities for coordinating environmental monitoring and data collection in Northland. The group looked at how they could build on work undertaken in the Waikato, where an interagency monitoring forum had recently been established to progress joint monitoring opportunities.

At the time, all councils in the region were considering how best to fulfil their statutory monitoring obligations under the Resource Management Act 1991, both in terms of State of the Environment Reporting, and monitoring general consent processes.

There was also a general lack of monitoring information available in the Northland region with local councils faced with both staffing and financial resource restrictions to developing full monitoring programmes.

Although Whangarei District Council had a monitoring strategy, other councils' strategies were at various stages of development. To make better use of the resources available it was decided to create a new regionally focused forum to share information that existed and to begin to work towards collecting information in a way that could assist everyone.

"The idea was to get people talking, sharing tools, supporting, guiding and advising each other and hopefully saving on costs too."

- Tanya Gray, Environmental Reporting Coordinator, Northland Regional Council

Benefits of Putting Pen to Paper...

- increased awareness of what information is available through developing inventories of information;
- minimised duplication of data collection and reduced costs of new data purchase;

- increased access to quality information to meet both statutory and public demands;
- assistance to local government decision making;
- assistance with and enhancement of best practice environmental reporting;
- initiation of joint monitoring projects;
- enhanced relationships between member organisations.

Putting it Together...

In 2002 the new Northland Monitoring Forum developed a membership agreement to formalise the commitment of participating agencies and to establish practical information sharing protocols. The Northland Regional Council took the lead role in preparing the draft agreement circulating it to other agencies for comment. For guidance other similar information sharing agreements were looked at including the MOUs governing Information Sharing Bay of Plenty (ishareBOP) in the Bay of Plenty and Waikato Information Forum (WINFO) in the Waikato. Drafts of the Northland agreement were circulated to other agencies for comment. Relevant local authority politicians were also informed of the intent to establish a regional environmental monitoring forum. Both Forum and Agreement processes were widely supported.

The Northland Monitoring Forum Membership Agreement outlines:

- who the Forum members are;
- why they are getting together;
- what the perceived benefits of working together are;
- how the Forum will generally operate.

The agreement also acknowledges the Northland Regional Council (NRC) as the co-ordinating agency for the Forum. The NRC has the role of convening and chairing Forum meetings three or four times a year and general administration tasks for the Forum such as agenda preparation and minute taking/circulation.

While agreements between organisations are typically one document that is co-signed, in this case individual Northland Monitoring Forum Membership Agreements were prepared and signed by senior management from each participating organisation ie. one agreement per partner organisation.

Key Agreement Features...

- it is short and simple;
- it is fairly broad, meaning it is flexible and can be adapted as required;
- it includes provision for annual review and new members can be invited to join.

Biggest Challenges...

- maintaining continuity of process amid staff turnover;
- balancing the aspirations to undertake new monitoring projects with the resources that were actually available;
- managing different personalities and styles of working and being clear about what the group had come together to achieve.

Things That Helped...

- having agreements from other interagency forums to refer to and build from;
- legislative support ie. a joint monitoring forum is supported by the Northland Regional Policy Statement and the Resource Management Act 1991;
- the commitment of participating staff to develop their own forum and interagency agreement.

"The early work we did in focusing on environmental monitoring and sharing of information has meant less duplication. For example, Northland Regional will collect water quality data and Whangarei District will collect noise data."

- Dr Kerry Grundy, Whangarei District Council

What Has Happened Since...

The Forum continues to come together several times a year to network, share information, and to undertake some small projects. Although some larger projects have been suggested resource constraints have meant the focus of the group has largely remained on information sharing. However, a new biodiversity project has been recently initiated.

From time to time consideration has been given to expanding the Forum's membership. The only new addition has been the Department of Conservation (DOC) who joined in August 2003. DOC has added their broad ranging monitoring information around species management and eco systems. A wide range of central government agencies have also attended meetings as guests.

In response to the Local Government Act 2002, including the emergence of Long Term Council Community Plans and community outcome monitoring processes, in 2005 the Forum was asked to consider widening its environmental focus to include social and economic monitoring and reporting. However, a decision was made to retain the Forum's environmental focus as its core objective. Discussions about integrated monitoring remain ongoing.

Members suggest that their written agreement has been a useful tool that has assisted the group with both longevity and retention of its focus - especially in times of staff turnover.

"Having an agreement that's flexible, informal and wide ranging, but also focused on a particular area, has enabled us to keep the forum on the rails."

- Dr Kerry Grundy, Whangarei District Council

Best Advice For Others...

- be encouraged to develop your own agreement;
- keep your agreement broad and flexible in the first instance so you can add to it as you go along;
- securing middle management support is critical;
- make sure you have political support for what you're creating.



Look familiar

Membership Agreement for the Northland Monitoring Forum

Purpose

The purpose of the forum is to coordinate the gathering and sharing of information, data, knowledge and expertise that is of common interest and value to Northland Monitoring Forum members.

The purpose of this agreement is to commit members to the establishment and maintenance of an information sharing forum.

Membership

The Northland Monitoring Forum members are:

Far North District Council
Kaipara District Council
Whangarei District Council
Northland Regional Council
Ministry for the Environment
Department of Conservation
and
other members invited by the group.

Objectives

1. To provide a regional forum for the exchange and sharing of data, knowledge and expertise in information and data management issues.
2. To provide a regional forum to advance the measurement of environmental performance indicators, which includes economic and social indicators.
3. To enhance the state of the environment reporting in the region.
4. To identify, prioritise and resolve data acquisition, information technology and management issues of mutual interest.
5. To provide opportunities to combine resources for the purchase of data and services.
6. To exchange data between members.¹
7. For all of the above, to utilise the benefits derived by the group for the mutual benefit of ratepayers.

¹ Distribution to a third party will be at the discretion of the original owner of the data.

Membership Agreement for the Northland Monitoring Forum

Membership Benefits of the Northland Monitoring Forum

- Duplication of data collection is minimised.
- Time and money is saved.
- Access to quality, relevant information to meet statutory and public demand is provided.
- Smart decision making within local government is assisted.
- Relationships between member organisations are enhanced.
- Awareness of what information is available is increased.
- The benefits of accessing the environmental information are apparent and effective decision making is enhanced.
- Environmental reporting is assisted and enhanced.

How is this to be achieved?

1. By the members being committed to the purpose and objectives described above and by committing resources to the purpose and objectives.
2. By exploring and promoting projects of mutual interest, and working towards projects that further the objectives of the forum.
3. By the members documenting the environmental data and information they collect.
4. By the members assisting the Ministry for the Environment to implement environmental performance indicators.
5. By the Northland Regional Council acting as the co-ordinating agency.
6. By the Ministry for the Environment and the Northland Regional Council providing technical and specialist support on agreed projects.
7. By the members working together to derive the stated benefits.
8. By ensuring appropriate and consistent representation.
9. Every year, the forum shall evaluate how well the process is working.

Signature

Signed _____

Position _____

Representing _____