

Busy ministry delays work on emissions planning

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PLANNING TO CUT New Zealand’s greenhouse gas emissions in line with the country’s Paris Agreement commitments has been delayed because of the Ministry for the Environment’s heavy workload, confidential papers show.

Heavily redacted planning documents for this year’s Budget, released by Treasury, show that it advised finance minister Steven Joyce against agreeing to climate change minister Paula Bennett’s plan for something called “Emissions Reduction At Home” which, presumably, would have given the ministry more resources to do the work.

“The minister for climate change issues’ original Emissions Reduction At Home budget bid sought funding of (figure redacted) over four years (rest of sentence redacted),” Treasury officials said in a March 24 aide memoire to Joyce following a meeting with Bennett.

“Treasury recommended not supporting this initiative because it was not investment-ready, we considered it to be business-as-usual work that could be resourced by existing FTEs (fulltime staff) when the ETS (Emissions Trading Scheme) review concludes next year, and we did not see any significant risks from delaying this work by a year.”

Modelling costs

Bennett had come back with a renewed bid for \$1 million a year for four years, which Treasury supported, the memo said.

Of this, \$400,000 a year would pay for external modelling of costs and options for meeting New Zealand’s 2030 emissions reduction target under the Paris Agreement, and \$600,000 a year would be used to talk to stakeholders about assumptions used in the models, and about ways to overcome market barriers.

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“This funding would buy the Government costed and consulted policy options, which we see value in,” Treasury said. “Modelling is expensive to procure and, given the baseline pressure MFE faces, we consider it is appropriate to provide additional funding for this.”

The modelling should complement the Emissions Trading Scheme, which was “New Zealand’s primary climate-change policy tool,” Treasury said.

Significant work

“To ensure value for money from this investment, it is essential the work is comprehensively integrated with the significant work under way this year in climate change, including the ETS review, Productivity Commission enquiry, Biological Emissions Reference Group, Forestry Emissions Reference Group and Adaptation Advisory Group.”

The note says that planning to reduce New Zealand’s domestic emissions in line with the Paris Agreement has been delayed because of pressure on MFE.

“We are aware that MFE’s baseline is under pressure from increasing workloads, and ministerial demands to deliver across the environment and climate change portfolios,” Treasury said.

The ministry had concentrated on collecting and reporting on data about New Zealand’s emissions, on servicing and reviewing the ETS, and on international climate negotiations and access to international carbon markets.

“This means the work plan for transitioning to a low-carbon economy, to sit alongside the ETS, will be delayed,” Treasury says.

Work details

“This baseline pressure means that MFE are not able to progress the work to sit alongside the ETS for achieving our 2030 target as quickly as ministers may like.”

A Cabinet minute dated April 18 and released in the same bundle of papers says that the climate minister will, by July 30, provide advice on the “detailed work programme for the domestic emissions reduction programme, including its relationship with the Emissions Trading Scheme”, and that by September 30 she will advise Cabinet how New Zealand will meet its Paris Agreement target (known as a National Determined Contribution).

New Zealand has promised to cut emissions to 11 per cent below 1990 levels by 2030. Government projections show emissions are likely to be 96 per cent above 1990 levels by 2030.

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