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Title: Freshwater policy needs better evaluation to help deliver on its intentions – new report

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A new report from the New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society | Ngā Kohinga Wai o Aotearoa (NZFSS) calls for stronger evaluation of freshwater policy - not to slow it down, but to help it succeed.

Commissioned through the NZFSS Contestable Fund and authored by Jennifer Price (Cobble Consulting), *Freshwater Policy Evaluation: Understanding the Barriers and Enablers of Effective Assessment* explores what's getting in the way of understanding whether freshwater policies are working, and how we can do better.

Joanne Clapcott, NZFSS President, notes: “Without policy evaluation, it is difficult to justify ongoing changes—why alter policies if we don’t know whether they are meeting their objectives? This excellent report provides much-needed clarity on the state of freshwater policy evaluation in Aotearoa. For me, it underscores not only the need for long-term thinking and commitment to our freshwater ecosystems but also the role of strong governance in ensuring accountability, transparency, and effective decision-making for the future of our waterways.”

The report highlights that while freshwater policy in Aotearoa New Zealand has made major strides, we still struggle to track effectiveness. This isn’t about blame, it’s about learning from experience.

“Ecosystems are complex, and it’s unrealistic to expect evaluations to resolve every uncertainty,” says Price. “But good evaluation helps us make more informed decisions about where to focus, what tools to use, and how to implement them well.”

Key findings include:

- The need for clear, measurable objectives to assess progress.
- Investment in fit-for-purpose monitoring and data systems.
- A better understanding of what works, where and why, including the use of models, mātauranga Māori, and local knowledge.
- Stronger legislative and organisational support for evaluation efforts.

“This report shouldn’t be seen as a critique of freshwater policy itself,” Price adds. “It’s about backing up policy with the systems and support needed to be able to tell how well it’s working.”

As the Government progresses changes to the resource management system and freshwater policy, the report provides timely, constructive suggestions on how to strengthen freshwater policy evaluation.

The full report is available on the NZFSS website at:

<https://freshwater.science.org.nz/news-publications-jobs/books-and-reports/reports/>

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Background:

This project was funded by NZFSS's Contestable Fund, which supports initiatives that raise the visibility and influence of freshwater science in policy. NZFSS aims to establish effective liaison between all persons interested in any aspect of fresh and brackish water research in New Zealand, and to encourage and promote these interests. NZFSS embraces the rich heritage of Māori culture in Aotearoa New Zealand and acknowledges the rights of Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi and the principles of partnership, participation, and protection.