Statement from the Chair, Friends of Taputeranga Marine Reserve Trust (28 April 2026)

There is no doubt that the sewage overflow will have impacts on the marine environment. Taputeranga Marine Reserve and Wellington's south coast support thousands of species of marine life, from marine mammals and seabirds to fish, sponges, invertebrates, algae, and other organisms. This area provides critical habitat for taonga species and valued kai moana.

The impacts on specific species and habitats are difficult to predict. Some species may be affected by a single, low-concentration exposure, while others may tolerate one event but be vulnerable to repeated exposures or higher concentrations. In some cases, impacts may not be immediately visible, as contaminants can accumulate over time before effects become apparent. Marine mammals may be exposed to disease, parasites, or toxins through the food chain; sponges, which filter extraordinary volumes of water each day, can accumulate contaminants; and prolonged nutrient inputs can have localised effects, including the potential for harmful algal blooms, depending on where pollution accumulates.

Untreated sewage discharge is never acceptable. Three-stage wastewater treatment should be considered a minimum standard, with many countries now moving to mandate a fourth treatment stage to remove trace substances such as pharmaceutical residues and pesticides, which can seriously impact aquatic life at extremely low concentrations.

It is paramount that the financial, operational, and governance decisions that led to the catastrophic failure of the Moa Point Wastewater Treatment Plant are thoroughly examined. The investigation process, findings, and recommendations must be transparent. There must be accountability for the failures, and meaningful changes to systems and processes to ensure this does not happen again.

In the short term, we are fortunate that the strong currents of Cook Strait help disperse pollution over a wider area, mitigating some, but not all, risks. However, this dynamic environment also makes it more difficult to predict where contamination will travel at any given time.

At present, there is a lack of timely, location-specific water quality information, meaning both the public and businesses are left without a clear understanding of current risk levels. Generic advice is not sufficient in a situation of this scale and duration.

Long-term monitoring of key species and habitats will be essential, but it must be matched by immediate, risk-based environmental monitoring and transparent reporting to understand and respond to ongoing impacts on marine life.

Marine biodiversity and high water-quality standards cannot be taken for granted. We cannot accept a slow, creeping decline in coastal water quality and biodiversity. This event has highlighted how deeply people in Wellington are connected to their beaches and ocean, how many rely on the coast for kai moana, and how highly valued the marine reserve is by the community. The coast and marine reserve are also economic drivers, and people and businesses suffer when there is a lack of care, investment, or oversight.

This must change. Increasing storm intensity and frequency mean we need to rethink how we work with nature, combining infrastructure investment with nature-based solutions. There is too much at stake - financially, culturally, for our city's identity, and for individual wellbeing.

Water-sensitive urban design, nature-based solutions, and smaller initiatives such as organic waste collection (with in-sink macerators adding an estimated 25% load to wastewater systems) are not optional "green add-ons". Together, they form part of financially sound, resilient infrastructure that delivers for ratepayers, communities, and the environment into the future.