

Freshwater Policy

Executive Summary

Freshwater has mauri, and is held within whakapapa that sustains whenua, people, and all forms of life.

Wai is not merely a resource to be owned, traded, or exhausted. It is a tāonga tuku iho; inherited, relational, and essential to our survival. When waterways are polluted or controlled without Māori authority, it is not only the environment that suffers, but whānau health, food systems, and cultural continuity.

Te Pāti Māori asserts that freshwater governance must be grounded in tikanga Māori, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the restoration of mana whenua authority.

Context

Across Aotearoa, freshwater systems are under severe stress. Industrial agriculture, extractive land use, and weak regulation have degraded rivers, lakes, and aquifers. Māori communities bear the greatest burden of this degradation through unsafe drinking water, loss of customary practices, and declining ecosystems.

Despite Te Tiriti o Waitangi guaranteeing tino rangatiratanga over wai, Māori have been systematically excluded from meaningful decision-making. Current freshwater frameworks continue to prioritise commercial use over ecological and cultural wellbeing.

Our Position

Te Pāti Māori affirms that:

- Wai is a tāonga with its own mauri
- Māori never ceded authority over freshwater; nor extinguished by the Crown
- Healthy waterways are essential to human and environmental wellbeing
- Governance must begin with mana whenua.

Freshwater policy must move beyond simply managing harm toward restoring and protecting the integrity of our waterways. Māori authority must be embedded structurally, expressed in practice, and recognised as both necessary and long overdue.

Te Pāti Māori will...

1. Recognise and uphold mana whenua authority over freshwater

- Ensure Māori decision-making power in all freshwater governance structures.
- End Crown-only control of water allocation and management.
- Uphold Te Tiriti guarantees of tino rangatiratanga.

2. Protect and restore the mauri of waterways

- Prioritise ecological health over commercial extraction, particularly by overseas foreign investors.
- Set enforceable limits that restore rivers, lakes, and aquifers.
- Support tikanga-based restoration practices.

3. Guarantee safe, affordable drinking water for all whānau

- Address long-standing water quality and water services failures in Māori communities.
- Invest in infrastructure as critical life-line services that protects both human health and ecosystem health.
- End inequities in access to clean water supply and services.

4. End the commodification of freshwater

- Reject privatisation and trading of water rights.
- Ensure water is governed as a taonga, not as a market asset only.
- Protect future generations from water scarcity, hoarding and profiteering.

5. Resource Māori-led freshwater solutions

- Fund iwi, hapū, and marae-based water initiatives at a sub-catchment level.
- Support mātauranga Māori alongside scientific approaches to research development and decision-making.
- Build long-term capacity for kaitiakitanga with clear statutory tools and roles in water management, alongside local authorities.

Our Commitment

Te Pāti Māori is committed to restoring the balance between people and water.

We will protect wai as a living tāonga, restore Māori authority, and ensure that mokopuna inherit waterways that are clean, accessible, healthy, and life-giving.