

STOPPING THE SPREAD: AOTEA CAULERPA RESPONSE PHASE 2

Discussion and recommendations for the 2021-2023 Governance Group

Exotic Caulerpa is well established and a new response model is urgently required

It is nearly three months since the Aotea Great Barrier Environmental Trust first requested that MPI fund a Project Lead, to be appointed to stand up an Aotea based response project. Since then, alarming number of further infestations have been confirmed by the NIWA dive team. Overseas experience indicates that northern sites are sparse enough to remove and that spread can be limited if we act now.

To stop the spread, an Aotea Caulerpa Response project can be established. We are expecting this is likely to be led by NRNWKA Trust, under the guidance of the taumata of kuia and kaumatua.

The phase 2 response needs to become operational within 1-2 months (ie the end of October 2023). This is because of the high risk to the Broken Islands, Port Fitzroy and the very rapid growth of Caulerpa and the upcoming El Nino summer. Risk of spread will increase significantly due to likely prevailing south west winds, clear weather and more boats visiting Aotea than has been the case for the last 3 years, under Covid and ongoing north east conditions.

There is a very grave risk that this increase in boat traffic will spread caulerpa to more Barrier anchorages and fishing spots unless new for for purpose restrictions and regular high risk site monitoring are both put in place. The current restrictions have not been enough to stop the spread and expire in October. We doubt that the current level of community knowledge of Caulerpa is sufficient for people to tolerate increased restrictions, but these are clearly required.

Recommended objectives: Phase 2 Response

- 1. Transition to an operational phase, based on Aotea, including Operational Governance and an Operational Team (see recommendations below) by the end of October 2023.*
- 2. Secure appropriate funding for an Aotea Caulerpa Response for a 3 year period (to reflect the scale of the problem, and serious cultural, social and economic risks to the entire north east coastal region of Aotearoa of uncontrolled exotic caulerpa on Aotea).*
- 3. Stop further spread – from the established biomass at Okupe and adjacent areas, and the growth and spread of Broken Islands and Port Fitzroy patches in those areas, by extending restrictions, standing up trained on-island surveillance and removal crews and scaling up biomass removal post-MPI trials.*
- 4. Intensify efforts to directly inform affected whanau, community members and visitors to Aotea waters of the risks and impacts of the infestation and what needs to be done to stop it (by the end of October 2023).*

Operational governance

We await the direction of NRNWKAT on next steps for this and assume that a steering committee suited to an operational project will be in place in due course. We expect that as is the case for Tū Mai Taonga, the project tikanga will be set by the Taumata and will guide all work.

We have also assumed that Ahu Moana teams will continue their monitoring work and that Ahu Moana is both complementary to and essential to the Aotea Caulerpa response. However overseas experience and feedback from the project suggests is not on its own going to be enough to head off the huge risks caulerpa poses for Aotea right now.

Operational team composition

Meanwhile there is plenty of experience in removing and managing the spread of caulerpa for us to draw upon. AGBET members have reviewed all available material over the last month. From this we expect that the shape of the Operational team needed to stop the spread of caulerpa in Aotea waters will need to include:

- A project Lead/Coordinator (the key coordination point, building the project plan, securing funding, managing resources and logistics, liaising with MPI and Auckland Council liaison, other sites)
- A communications officer (whānau & community education, direct engagement, visitor comms, collaboration with agencies on spread pathways, progress updates)
- A professional surveillance team (certified divers, transport, ROVs, NIWA liaison, Ahu Moana liaison) to map and characterise the infestations
- Caulerpa removal crews (local teams trained for removal and treatment of sites, may be volunteers)
- Mapping and evaluation (using a GIS similar to the Tū Mai Taonga system, careful recording of sites, ongoing monitoring data, new reports of sites from the community, visitors, fishers)

We are asking the 2021-2023 Governance Group to recognise that the speed of response to date must change now.

Caulerpa mass is literally growing by the day. The CANs must be replaced by new restrictions that accurately reflect the pattern of spread that NIWA surveys confirmed exists and which are understood by all affected people. Local capacity to take on delimiting and removal does exist and it needs to be mobilised in September in parallel to other work.

Recommendations:

1. Extend the current area to include previously proposed boundaries from Tohorā/Rabbit Island to north of Kaikoura, including the Broken Islands as a precautionary measure.
2. Request that MPI fund and procure surveillance work using a local surveillance crew (stand this up in September) to confirm the extent of Caulerpa in the Broken Islands and Port Fitzroy, to inform decision making.
3. Request that MPI confirm funding for and begin urgent recruitment of a contract Project Lead/Coordinator (1FTE).
4. Request that Auckland Council and MPI confirm funding for and begin recruitment for a contract Communications officer (0.5FTE).
5. Identify a pilot site/s in the Broken Islands and Port Fitzroy area for local crews to begin to learn hand removal and cover methods on the job, and support a call for expressions of interest in joining local removal crews.
6. Support Auckland Council to update pathway management responses and resourcing in preparation for the 2023/24 summer season.
7. Request that MPI and Auckland Council confirm the steps required to propose and business case project budgets for phase 2 - the Aotea Caulerpa Response.