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Desmarais, Tso, Boyack, 2019

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Councils declare climate emergencies, but will it result in any real change?

Felix Desmarais, Matthew Tso and Nicholas Boyack · 19:29, Jun 28 2019

STUFF

A new interactive tool allows users to toggle controls to see how climate change will affect different parts of the Wellington region.

Councils around the country are declaring climate change emergencies, but questions are being raised over whether the move will create any tangible change.

Scientists and activists believe the declarations will be meaningless unless they're backed up by solid action, offsetting criticism the measures were purely tokenistic.

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Those Wellington city councillors opposed to the emergency declaration claimed the measure was "preachy" "nonsense" and an example of "green-washing".

FELIX DESMARAIS/STUFF

Wellington City Council declared a climate and ecological emergency on June 20.

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While Victoria University Wellington climate scientist James Renwick believed the move "put a stake in the ground" and underscored the seriousness of the issue - he said definitive action was needed.

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"It really is an emergency, we need to do a hell of a lot more.

"If we allow [climate] change to continue at the rate it's going, before the end of this century, there will be trillions of dollars of damage and hundreds of millions

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY WELLINGTON

Professor James Renwick says a climate emergency declaration requires action behind it.

Professor Tim Naish, a glaciologist at the Antarctic Research Centre, said declaring a climate emergency was an easy thing to say, but a harder thing to do.

"If we're going to solve this problem, the scale is enormous. We have to be on almost a war-time footing.

"That invokes a whole lot of legislative change and in some cases, losses of liberties.

"There's a difference between declaring a climate emergency and taking action that will prevent a disaster."

SUPPLIED

Professor Tim Naish, of the Antarctic Research Centre says declaring a climate emergency is an easy thing to say, but a harder thing to do.

Part of that action would have to be legislative infrastructure to support "dramatic" social change.

"If you have an earthquake, you have the Earthquake Commission. We have a system."

HOW GOVERNMENTS ARE RESPONDING



Local Government NZ president Dave Cull said councils were at the "front line" of combating climate change, but there was "no national framework" for how local bodies should tackle the issue.

"Declaring a climate emergency acts as a catalyst for urgent action. It's a way for councils to increase focus on this issue, and call for greater national support on climate change adaptation."

There was no such infrastructure in place for climate change, but the closest thing proposed came under the Zero Carbon Bill, currently before Parliament: an independent climate commission.

The agency would be able to give expert advice to the Government on targets and policies to implement the zero carbon goal by 2050.

DECLARATIONS? NOT YET

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the move and had commissioned a report about its implications. A decision would be made on August 21.

"Greater Wellington wants to ensure any such declaration is accompanied by a supporting plan of action, for example setting a target to reduce our carbon emissions," Heath said.

Upper Hutt Mayor Wayne Guppy said his council was taking climate change "very seriously" and said a declaration would need to be informed by community discussion.

South Wairarapa District Council spokeswoman Amy Wharram said the council was focusing on "meaningful actions in response to climate change" as opposed to declaring an emergency.

JARED NICOLL/STUFF

Upper Hutt Mayor Wayne Guppy says his council was yet to declare a climate change crisis. (File photo)

It was working towards employing a dedicated "climate change champion" in conjunction with Carterton District Council.

Masterton District, Napier City and Central Hawke's Bay District councils had not made declarations, but all said they were committed to action on the issue.