

Mt Welcome Fast-track Panel
C/- Environmental Protection Authority
By email: [REDACTED]
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New Zealand
18 September 2026
File ref: FTAA- 2603-1181

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Tēnā koe Mr Robinson

Re: Response to paragraphs [10] and [11] of Minute 18 from the Panel

In paragraphs [12] of Minute 18 of the Mt Welcome's Fast-track Expert Consenting Panel, the Department of Conservation (DOC) is given leave to provide comments on information provided by the Applicant.

Request

[12] Mr Payne is requested to provide:

- (a) Maps of the areas on manual lizard survey he undertook;*
- (b) A copy of the EIANZ guidelines discussed in the herpetology JWS;*
- (c) Confirmation and documentation of the proposed additional area of c.2,.4ha of enhanced lizard habitat discussed in the JWS;*
- (d) A discussion of the practicality of fencing lizard relocation areas. This material should be provided by 5pm on 8 September. If counsel for the applicant has any comment/ submissions as to the weight to be given to threatened status beyond that of Mr Payne, it should be supplied in the same timeframe.*

Once this package of material is supplied, Dr Fea and Ms Hooker have until noon on 11 September to supply a response.

This deadline for comments was extended to 18 September 2026, and the EPA has confirmed that the comments on this information should be from Mr Wedding.

Response

Please see our response from Mr Chris Wedding in Attachment 1.

We trust that the response adequately addresses the information requested.

Nāku noa, nā



Linda Kirk
Fast Track Applications Manager

Attachment 1: Response from Mr Chris Wedding

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the further information provided by Mr Payne in response to paragraph 12 of Minute 18. My comments follow the four matters identified by the Panel.

(a) Maps of areas subject to manual lizard survey

The additional mapping is useful and provides a clearer record of where manual searching was undertaken. Mr Payne records approximately seven person-hours of manual searching across several visits between March 2019 and September 2026. I have no substantive concern with the search effort undertaken.

My concern is with the interpretation of the results. No lizards were detected during the additional manual searches, but in my opinion those non-detections should not be interpreted as demonstrating absence from the habitats searched.

The EIANZ Guidelines expressly state that “*not recorded*” does not necessarily demonstrate absence (para 1, p 57, EIANZ guidelines) and requires assumptions and limitations associated with survey methods and resulting conclusions to be identified and discussed. Manual searching and artificial cover objects are useful survey methods, but neither provides complete detection in complex forest-floor habitat. Lizards may occupy litter, root systems, embedded or decomposing wood, subsurface cavities and other refuges that cannot be thoroughly searched without destructive methods.

Supplied Photographs

The additional photographs are useful because they provide a clearer indication of the ground-layer conditions within the pine and planted indigenous vegetation. They confirm that habitat structure varies across the vegetation complex, but also show many features that are consistent with copper skink habitat I have observed elsewhere, including accumulated litter, fallen and decaying woody material, root systems, localised ground vegetation, debris, and variation in light and moisture conditions.

Such spatial variation is typical of lizard habitat and is consistent with the agreed position in the JWS that copper skinks are patchy in their distribution. Patchy habitat use and spatial variation in detections are therefore not unexpected. In my opinion, neither provides a basis for drawing a habitat boundary around the locations where lizards were detected or for treating adjoining vegetation as non-habitat.

I also note that a number of the plate captions appear to rely on steep terrain, south-facing aspect, pine canopy and, in some locations, the inability to install ACOs as reasons for discounting habitat suitability. There is no supported ecological basis for treating a south-facing aspect, steep slope or pine canopy as excluding copper skink habitat. These characteristics may influence local microclimate and patterns of habitat use, but they are not, either individually or collectively, diagnostic of habitat absence. Any conclusion that such areas are unsuitable would

require species-specific evidence and consideration of the ground-level habitat actually present, including litter, woody debris, roots, refugia and vegetation structure.

Similarly, where steep terrain prevented the installation of ACOs, that is a limitation of the survey method, not a characteristic demonstrating that the area is unsuitable habitat. If anything, reduced survey coverage should result in greater caution when interpreting non-detection, rather than increased confidence that lizards are absent.

(b) EIANZ Guidelines

I have no concern with the provision of the 2018 EcIA Guidelines. I also consider the August 2026 EIANZ explanatory note on scale to be relevant to the disagreement recorded in the JWS. The explanatory note confirms that the appropriate assessment scale should be ecologically relevant to the feature, population or process being assessed and that magnitude should generally be assessed at the same scale as ecological value. It cautions against expanding the magnitude assessment to a substantially larger landscape where this dilutes a material and permanent loss of an ecological feature assessed at a smaller scale. Wider district, regional or national context remains relevant, but should inform rather than supplant the scale at which the ecological feature has been assessed.

Dr Bramley's independent ecological advice to the Panel supports this interpretation. He considers that the explanatory note cautions against "zooming out" to wider catchment, landscape, district or national contexts in a manner that dilutes a localised effect. He similarly interprets wider geographic scales, including the Ecological District or Region, as providing context rather than changing the baseline scale used in the matrix assessment. In relation to lizards specifically, Dr Bramley considers that an effect should not be characterised as Low simply because the species or habitat is abundant elsewhere in Wellington, and that each local population should be evaluated on its own merits

(c) Confirmation and documentation of the proposed additional area of c. 2.4 ha of enhanced lizard habitat discussed in the JWS

I welcome the identification of approximately 2.4 ha of additional land that could potentially be protected and enhanced as lizard habitat. Figure 2 confirms multiple locations but provides limited information on the existing ecological condition of these areas or the enhancement required before they could function as receiving habitat.

The additional land is not ecologically equivalent. The smaller areas contiguous with the SNA and with R5 have good potential to function as lizard habitat because they expand or connect with existing or proposed habitat and therefore improve habitat extent, connectivity and opportunities for dispersal. These areas are, in principle, suitable additions to the receiving-site network.

In contrast, the larger isolated area is separated from the existing and proposed habitat network and, on the information provided, does not appear to support a resident lizard population. I do not consider that area suitable to be relied on as equivalent habitat gain unless a functional connection to occupied habitat is established or a viable founding population is deliberately introduced. The latter would amount to a further translocation and would carry additional uncertainty regarding establishment, carrying capacity, predator pressure and long-term persistence.

The information provided also does not describe the existing habitat condition, planting and refuge requirements, pest management, carrying capacity, timing of enhancement, monitoring, or long-term protection for these additional areas. I therefore do not consider that the full 2.4 ha can presently be treated as equivalent habitat gain.

My previous recommendation on receiving-site readiness remains. All terrestrial release and restoration areas should provide structurally complex indigenous habitat and appropriate ground-level refuges before lizards are relocated. I recommend a measurable requirement of at least 80% established indigenous ground cover, together with confirmation by the supervising herpetologist that habitat structure, refuge availability and other species-specific requirements are suitable.

Overall, the additional areas contiguous with the SNA and R5 improve the available lizard management options. The larger isolated area does not currently provide the same ecological function and should not be counted on an equivalent area-for-area basis.

(d) A discussion of the practicality of fencing lizard relocation areas.

I agree with Mr Payne that a predator-proof fence around the lizard release areas is not necessary or proportionate. In my opinion, effective protection can be achieved without such fencing, provided that other measures are sufficiently robust. These should include establishment of dense, structurally complex indigenous ground cover and refugia before release, sustained rodent and domestic-cat management, monitoring and adaptive management, and enduring responsibility for maintaining those measures. I have previously recommended that this long-term responsibility could sit with a Residents' Association or equivalent body.