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Government sets target to make New Zealand 'predator-free' by 2050

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Minister Steven Joyce, Prime Minister John Key and Minister Maggie Barry get up close with the fauna at Zealandia, after announcing a target to make New Zealand pest-free by 2050.

The Government wants to make New Zealand predator-free by 2050, formally adopting a target to eradicate all pests that threaten New Zealand's native birds.

Prime Minister John Key announced the goal, alongside Conservation Minister Maggie Barry, as well as a \$28 million funding injection into a joint venture company to kickstart the campaign.

"Rats, possums and stoats kill 25 million of our native birds every year, and prey on other native species such as lizards and, along with the rest of our environment, we must do more to protect them," Key said.

Rats, possums and stoats kill 25 million native birds every year, says PM John Key.

The announcement gives the Government a jump on the Green Party, which has refrained from setting such a target, though has criticised the Government's reliance on the private sector to save critically endangered birds.

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By 2025, the Government has set four interim goals, which include:

- Having 1 million hectares of land where pests are suppressed or removed;
- The development of a scientific breakthrough, capable of removing entirely one small mammalian predator;
- To be able demonstrate that areas of 20,000 hectares can be predator free without the use of fences like the one at at Wellington's Zealandia sanctuary;
- And the complete removal of all introduced predators from offshore island nature reserves.

Introduced pests threatened the economy and primary sector, their total economic cost is estimated at about \$3.3 billion a year, Key said.

"This is the most ambitious conservation project attempted anywhere in the world, but we believe if we all work together as a country we can achieve it."

The Government has set up a new Crown Entity – Predator Free New Zealand Limited – to drive the programme alongside the private sector.

That was on top of \$60m to \$80m already invested in pest control each year.

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Predator Free New Zealand would be responsible for identifying large, high-value predator control projects and attracting co-investors to boost their scale and success.

It was unclear however, if a national strategy had been developed to get Kiwis behind the initiatives – a move which could make it easier for councils to pass projects through at the local and regional level.

The Government would look to provide funding on a "one for two" basis – that is for every \$2 local councils and the private sector put in, the Government would provide \$1.

Barry said the target would require a "massive team effort" across public and private sectors, iwi and community groups.

"Now is the time for a concerted long-term nationwide effort to rid ourselves of the introduced rats, stoats and possums that have placed so much of our natural heritage in jeopardy," she said.

The Predator Free NZ Project would combine the resources the lead Government agencies – the Department of Conservation and the Ministry of Primary Industries.

"Possums and ferrets are the main carriers of bovine TB, which is a very destructive disease for cattle and deer," Primary Industries

Minister Nathan Guy said.

SCIENCE HAS COME A LONG WAY

Science and Innovation Minister Steven Joyce said New Zealand would prove itself a world leader in conservation science and technology.

"For the first time, technology is starting to make feasible what previously seemed like an unattainable dream.

"I think what's really exciting is for those of us watching this closely, is that the technology has moved dramatically," Joyce said.

"You used to have to put out a trap line across an area of land and send people back every time the traps were sprung.

"Now you can set them and leave them, link them through GPS, it's about one seventeenth of the cost to maintain predator control over a piece of land, than it was just a few years ago."

Barry said target was considered unachievable until recently.

The potential for scientific break-through's were what made the target achievable.

WHERE'S THE MONEY?

The target has drawn tentative support from Opposition parties, but Labour is questioning the Government's level of commitment.

Predator Free New Zealand is a laudable idea but the Government has not committed any real money into killing New Zealand's pests, says Labour's conservation spokesperson Nanaia Mahuta.

"The only promise is that the Government will 'look' to contribute one dollar for every two dollars from councils and the private sector.

"This lack of long term funding to kill our millions of pests has to be considered alongside years of funding cuts that have blunted the work of the Department of Conservation."

Green Party conservation spokesman Kevin Hague said welcomed the target, but said research showed it would cost \$9b to make New Zealand predator-free.

"The Government seems happy to once again put out the begging bowl to the private sector to fund what should be taken care of by the Government.

"We have real concerns over what will happen to this predator-free dream if the Government can't attract private funding, or if that private funding dries up."

ACT leader David Seymour welcomed the announcement and said it echoed his own policy to sell off Landcorp and place the money it gained into a trust, so community groups and private enterprises could apply to operate inland wildlife sanctuaries.

"We're interested in seeing how the Prime Minister plans to skip inland islands and eradicate pests from the nation wholesale. It's a laudable and ambitious goal, we look forward to seeing the detail."

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