

23 December 2021

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Reporter  
NZME

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Tēnā koe Laurel

Thank you for your Official Information Act request to the Department of Conservation (the Department), received on 24 June 2021 in which you asked for:

*“This request relates to the November 18 accident on the Whanganui River in which two Conservation Department staff in a jetboat collided with a canoeist.*

*The accident resulted in injury to him.*

*The department did an internal investigation, and Maritime New Zealand also investigated. Its investigation is not yet complete.*

*The Whanganui Chronicle would like to know:*

- *all details of the accident, as understood and held by the department*
- *the health status of the canoeist involved*
- *what form its investigation took*
- *whether that investigation is finished*
- *what it found – including whether staff were keeping logbooks correctly, whether they were involved with dealing or using illegal drugs, whether their work was up to standard*
- *what has the department done as a result of its investigation – made people redundant, moved their place of work, instituted training, or any other action*
- *how will this incident impact the future of the department’s work in the Whanganui region*
- *anything else the department wants the public to know”*

On 14 July 2021 we provided you with a response to your questions, withholding information on the findings of the investigation, under section 9(2)(h) of the Official Information Act – to maintain legal professional privilege.

We acknowledge the incident was a serious one for the people directly involved and for the wider Department of Conservation organisation. For the sake of our public accountability, it was important we took a very hard look at all the aspects that contributed to the incident even in minor or seemingly remote ways. We therefore initiated an investigation using the

“Incident, Cause, Analysis, Method” (ICAM) format and a report (the Report) was produced. We tasked the investigation team with looking wider than the incident itself and being highly critical to ensure any and all contributing factors were considered and addressed.

This report is complete and as the legal proceedings around this matter have now been resolved, and I have decided to release the Report (Attachment 1), subject to information being withheld under section 9(2)(a) of the OIA – to protect the privacy of natural persons. A copy of the Report is enclosed and provides the details of the accident held by the Department. We are unable to comment on the canoeists health as this is not information we hold.

I have decided to withhold the interview notes which are referenced within this investigation report under section 9(2)(ba) of the OIA, because the interviews were subject to an obligation of confidence and releasing accounts of the interviewees would be likely to prejudice the supply of similar information, and it is in the public interest that such information should continue to be supplied.

The Report includes details gathered through these interviews and I consider the summary of them provided by this report meets the public interest in this matter. In making my decision to withhold information, I have considered the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the Official Information Act and determined no such public interest outweighs the need to withhold this information.

The list of recommendations in the Report is comprehensive, however I can confirm the Department’s work in response to the recommendations is either complete, or underway where work is of an ongoing nature. I have attached (Attachment 2), for ease of reference, a schedule of the recommendations and progress against implementing them.

It was very important to us that we learn from what the investigation team found. The ICAM Report prompted a “Stop” of all work within Whanganui District and a 90-day programme to reset expectations and understandings around behaviour, safe operating practices, and team culture.

The stop work call was made to recognise there were serious and on-going failings in individual, system and process approaches to our health and safety. The Report also points to concerns around underlying team culture. Continuing like this was simply not an option.

During the stop period, the Department deferred all field work. This delayed some of our normal winter maintenance on campsites on the Whanganui Journey but winter maintenance work on the Mountains to Sea cycleway was not affected, as external contractors were already deployed doing significant capital upgrades and maintenance work was wrapped up into this work. There was an impact on our biodiversity work, but we are hoping to catch this up over the summer period through use of additional contractors.

The reset involved all staff and work did not resume until I was satisfied it could be done safely and with team culture improvements. The end result is the Department has changed what it does, and how it acts/responds at a local, district and national level. Shining the light

on deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour has made us a stronger, more professional organisation.

The Report confirms that drug use was not a factor in this accident with the Skipper being tested immediately following the accident. The Department has an organisation wide drug testing policy, which allows for testing where there is reasonable cause or following any accident. We are committed to having a safe and healthy workplace and illegal drugs have no place in it.

The Report found that boat modifications undertaken with good intent were contributing factors to this incident. We have now implemented a formal procedure for proposed modifications to departmental vessels and are evaluating fixes for the issues identified on the vessel Wawahia. We are trialling these on one boat before applying them to the rest of the fleet.

The Report also highlighted communication challenges given the remote location. Although these communication difficulties had no direct involvement in the accident occurring, their inadequacies did make responding to the situation slower.

To some extent these challenges are symptomatic of the geography and technology limitations, however, this Report has provided the impetus for us to implement the “gold-standard” of remote communication technology and all our boats are now equipped with Sat-Phones. In-Reach, radio-telephone, EPIRB and cell phones.

In summary, we welcome the findings that were brought forward by a very thorough investigation and confirm that we have are committed to learning from it and implementing meaningful long-term changes.

You are entitled to seek an investigation and review of my decision by writing to an Ombudsman as provided by section 28(3) of the Official Information Act.

Please note that this letter (with your personal details removed) and enclosed documents may be published on the Department’s website.

Nāku noa, nā



Damian Coutts  
Director Operations Central North Island  
Department of Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*



### Schedule of Documents

<b>Item</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Document description</b>	<b>Decision</b>
1	19 November 2020	ICAM investigation into Whanganui Journey	Released in part
2	December 2021	Summary of Recommendations arising from the ICAM Report	Released in full

