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Submission on Dunedin City Council's Annual Plan (2023-24) and Long Term Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on the Dunedin City Council's Consultation Document.

1. Acknowledgement

Predator Free Dunedin acknowledges the support received to date from Dunedin City Council and the leadership it has demonstrated towards achieving the national vision for a Predator Free New Zealand by 2050 through its support of both Predator Free Dunedin and the City Sanctuary project.

We are grateful for Dunedin City Council's financial contribution to Predator Free Dunedin between 2018 and 2023 of \$850,000, and its ongoing inclusion of predator control operations in Council reserves as in-kind support.

Predator Free Dunedin also acknowledges the commitment made by Dunedin City Council as the delivery partner for Predator Free Dunedin's City Sanctuary project. This is critical for supporting community-led predator control in backyards and reserves across Dunedin's wider city and urban areas and the project has seen a high level of success over the last three years.

2. Background

The vision for a Predator Free New Zealand by 2050 was launched in 2018 by the New Zealand Government. It aims to eradicate mustelids (stoats, ferrets, and weasels), rats and possums from New Zealand by 2050. Dunedin has an important role to play in this movement. As the wildlife capital of New Zealand, we are well-placed to see immediate gains for a diverse range of native species through large-scale predator control.

Predator Free Dunedin is a conservation collective of 22 organisations working collaboratively to protect native biodiversity and strengthen communities. In 2018, it was one of five landscape-scale predator control projects chosen by the crown-owned funding agency Predator Free 2050 Limited and the Predator Free Dunedin Trust was allocated \$4.3 million across 5 years to initiate work towards removing possums, rats and stoats from 31,000 hectares of Dunedin's urban and rural landscapes.

It will take an all-of-community approach to achieve the vision for a Predator Free Dunedin. We are facilitating community efforts by strengthening existing projects and supporting new initiatives to carry out strategic and targeted landscape-scale predator control. Our project enables the following delivery partners to carry out this work:

- The Otago Peninsula Biodiversity Group is delivering efforts to eradicate possums from the Otago Peninsula.
- The Landscape Connections Trust is delivering the Halo Project — a community effort to target rodents, possums, and mustelids in the West Harbour/Mt Cargill area. The Halo Project now also includes a 'buffer zone'. This expansion covers 35,112 hectares of Chain Hills, Flagstaff, Swampy Summit, and the Silver Peaks and uses the Taieri River as a natural barrier to limit reinvasions and protect some of the largest conservation areas in Dunedin. Halo continues to work collaboratively with OSPRI's TB-Free programme to see immense gains for biodiversity, primary industry, and communities in the area.
- Dunedin City Council is delivering the City Sanctuary project —supporting communities to undertake predator control in 34 priority suburbs across the city area.

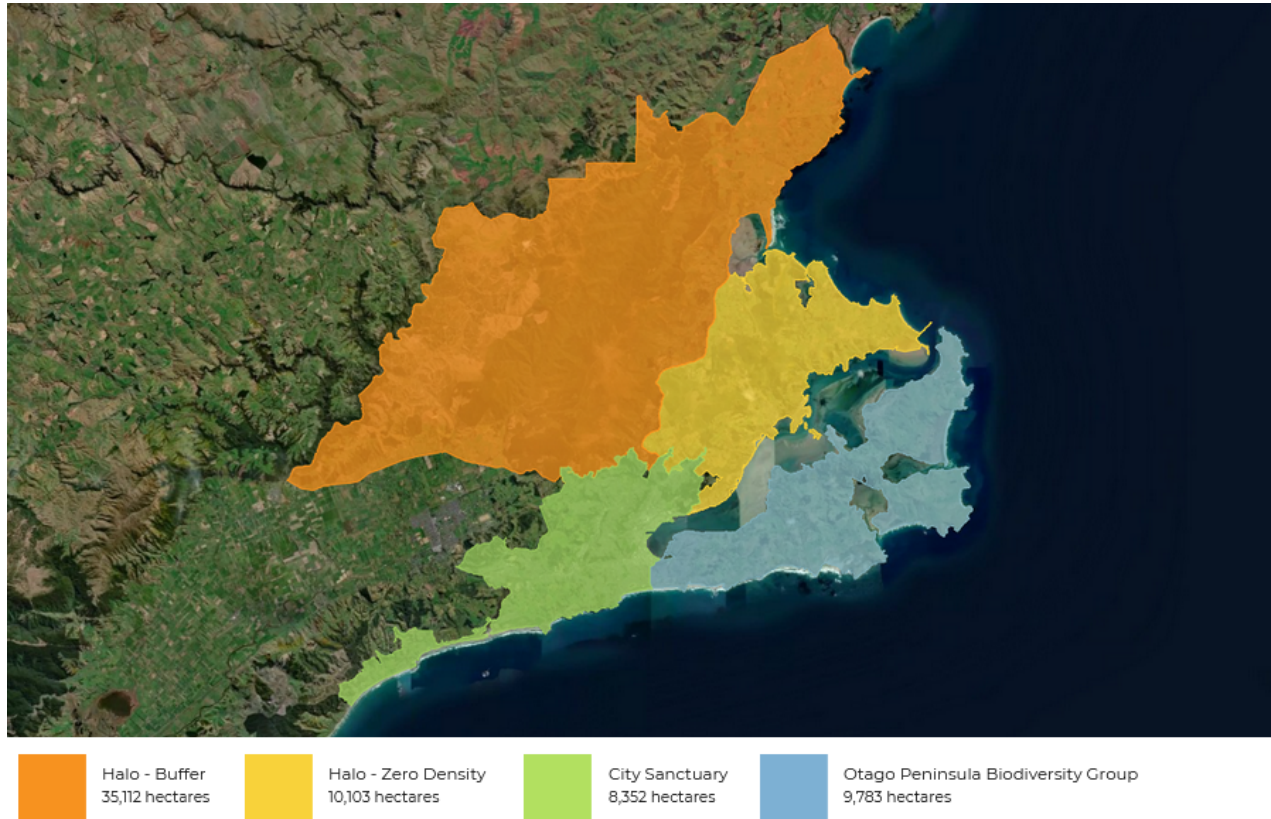


Figure 1. Map of Predator Free Dunedin operational area and its three delivery partners (Halo Project is split into the 'buffer zone' and the 'zero density zone').

3. Benefits of predator control for Dunedin City

Dunedin City Council would see a wide range of benefits for policy outcomes through the continuation and support of landscape-scale predator control being carried out by Predator Free Dunedin and the community.

Protecting native biodiversity

Introduced predator are a major problem for our native wildlife and plants. Stoats, possums, and rats threaten native species like plants, birds, lizards and invertebrates through predation and competition for food and space. More than 4,000 of New Zealand's native or endemic species are classified by the Department of Conservation as being threatened or at risk of extinction and New Zealand has the unfortunate title of having the highest rate of threatened species in the world. Predator control will have a major impact for these species and their ecosystems.

Building resilient communities

An often-overlooked benefit to predator control and community conservation is its ability to create more resilient communities by building strong links between people and encouraging them to work with others towards a common goal. These connections are proven to improve a community's response to emergency situations and strengthen social cohesion within a community.

For example, during efforts by the City Sanctuary Project to facilitate backyard trapping in Māori Hill, there were several occasions where neighbours on the same street had not previously met and are now working collaboratively to target predators such as possums. Across all three projects, we have received the support from hundreds of volunteers who are eager to get involved with community-based conservation and meet others with shared interests.

Creating healthier communities

Community conservation also creates healthier communities by improving people's health and wellbeing. Spending time in nature leads to better outcomes for mental and physical health such as a boosted immune system, lower blood pressure, reduced stress levels and improved mood. Internationally, people who live in greener neighbourhoods have improved health — even when income and other advantages are taken into account.

Removing introduced predators reduces the transmission of disease. Rats are known to carry at least seven diseases that are transmissible to humans including giardia and salmonella. Possums are known vectors of Bovine-Tuberculosis which may infect cattle and other livestock.

Predator control also improves mental wellbeing with people feeling less stressed and anxious without the presence of animals such as rats and mice living within their houses or properties.

Protecting housing infrastructure

Predator control also provides benefits to housing infrastructure by reducing damage caused by animals. For example, rats and possums are known to damage electrical wires, building insulation, roofing, and walls. This aligns strongly with the work being carried out by Dunedin City Council as part of their Cosy Homes plan and has strong benefits for its social and housing policies.

Working towards our zero carbon goals

Predator Free Dunedin commends the Dunedin City Council for its leadership in declaring a climate crisis in 2019 and supports its efforts to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. Landscape-scale predator control improves the ability of native forest ecosystems to sequester carbon by increasing forest health and canopy coverage, thereby helping meet the DCC's 2030 carbon zero goals.

Creating jobs

Protecting nature created jobs which support the local economy. Predator Free Dunedin has created 23 FTE roles and has an average of 12 FTE contractors employed annually. These individuals are working to restore our environment, build our natural capital and create the basis for which our tourism economy and local community can flourish.

Community conservation also provides the opportunity for people in our community to upskill in activities that will make them more likely to gain employment. Over the past year, we have seen 40,000 hours of volunteer efforts contributed to the Predator Free Dunedin vision. This includes examples where employees have gone on to be hired in paid positions.

Taking a more cost-effective approach

Shifting from a model of sustained predator control to eradication reduces the long-term cost of controlling the predators being targeted by Predator Free 2050. This approach requires effective coordination of efforts between agencies such as the Department of Conservation and OSPRI, local government and communities.

Public support for predator control has increased and residents are more willing to contribute financially towards the tools and materials required to carry out predator control in their backyards. Our survey of 244 residents in 2019 found 90% were willing to pay a one-off cost for the necessary equipment to control predators on their property including nearly half (48%) who were willing to pay \$50 or more. In 2020, a Dunedin City Council People's Panel survey facilitated by City Sanctuary found of 120 residents 97% of people are willing to purchase a trap for their property including a quarter (25%) who would be willing to pay \$50 or more.

4. Recommendations and submission points

Overall, Predator Free encourages Dunedin City Council to further its commitment to the predator free movement by ensuring its full estate is managed effectively and cohesively. This includes through continued support for the City Sanctuary project and by funding predator control across its estate as per the West Harbour Mount Cargill Succession Plan... and by getting tougher on cat control.

Responsible cat ownership

Predator Free Dunedin applaud the Dunedin City Council for their responsible dog ownership initiatives. We are also in full support of council-led cat control initiatives, such as the promotion of responsible cat ownership through de-sexing and micro-chipping. We strongly urge the Council to continue this work, however, we believe is more that the Council could be doing in this area.

Public opinion and attitudes towards cat control are shifting. As native wildlife returns to our cities, New Zealanders are increasingly supportive of a new approach to cat control. A recent survey undertaken by the Predator Free NZ Trust found that 82% of cat owners believe that all cats should be de-sexed (except for registered breeders), two-thirds of all respondents (whether cat owners or not) supported microchipping, and 61% supported a limit on the number of cats a person could own. The Predator Free New Zealand Trust presented evidence to the Environment Select Committee recently, alongside Forest & Bird and the SPCA, in support of a petition for mandatory desexing and microchipping of all cats. Predator Free Dunedin believe that the Dunedin City Council should make desexing and microchipping mandatory for all pet cats.

Support across Three Waters estate

To the North of Dunedin (around West Harbour and Mount Cargill), our operational teams are working towards reducing possum populations to zero across more than 10,000 hectares, strengthening previous operations that have been carried out by OSPRI and the Halo Project.

PFD has now expanded to include a 'buffer zone.' This extension from the Halo Project core area will protect native wildlife, improve forest health, and reduce the risk of re-invasion to the wider Dunedin area where eradicating possums is our main focus. It spans 35,112 hectares of Chain Hills, Flagstaff, Swampy Summit, and the Silver Peaks and uses the Taieri River as a natural barrier to limit reinvasions, helping to protect some of the largest conservation areas in Dunedin.

This expansion has included a significant in-kind contribution from the Parks and Recreation Services department towards managing Dunedin City Council reserves but did not include predator control on the Three Waters estate (spanning 3,500 hectares). Predator Free Dunedin urges Dunedin City Council to further general biodiversity enhancement across this area by supporting predator control operations to complement efforts across the proposed expansion area. These large areas often have very high predator and pest browser populations. The Dunedin City Council's political and financial support to enable PFD to complete large-scale and cost-effective works across these areas is vital to our collective success.

Continued support for City Sanctuary

Predator Free Dunedin is grateful for the support provided by Dunedin City Council as delivery partner for the City Sanctuary project and strongly recommends it continues to facilitate this work. We applaud the leadership that Council has taken in leading this work, engaging residents to create a vibrant sanctuary in its city area where wildlife and communities can thrive.

Predator control being carried out in backyards and reserves across Dunedin's urban and city areas is crucial to connect the three projects, providing a wild pathway of health habitat for native taonga species to move safely from Dunedin's most pristine conservation estates (such as Silver Peaks) to the Halo area with Orokonui Ecosanctuary at its core, through the City and out to the Peninsula.

Predator Free Dunedin provides direct support to the Dunedin City Council via additional Predator Free Dunedin funding being allocated to two additional fixed term positions in Parks and Recreation for the City Sanctuary project.

The team at City Sanctuary continue to lead the way in urban predator control and have seen a number of recent successes. These include;

- Completing a two-year backyard trapping pilot programme working with residents across three suburbs in Dunedin and publishing key findings. This kind of backyard trapping has never been done before and has already been providing important learnings for the predator free movement in Dunedin and beyond.
- Taking a more targeted approach, backyard trapping in properties with good possum habitat, which, combined with research on urban possum movements to save time and resources.
- Regularly checking hundreds of traps in parks and reserves across the city that target possums, rodents, and mustelids. This is the main tool for protecting possum pathways and could not be done without the help of more than 100 dedicated volunteers who are incredibly enthusiastic about caring for their local patch of reserve.
- Installing rifleman nest boxes for these birds who are breeding at Ross Creek. These will help show how removing predators from Ross Creek may increase the numbers of these native birds over time.
- Hearing reports of ruru calling from residents in Signal Hill, North East Valley, Normanby, Opoho, the Glen, and Caversham. For some these are the first birds heard in over 25 years.
- Marked improvement in tree health at the Dunedin Botanic Gardens where flower buds and new growth were left untouched by possums for the first time in several years.

Ultimately, the community involvement in predator control efforts in the City Sanctuary area will result in making predator control a part of everyday life – as normal as putting out one’s recycling bins. This ensures long-term sustainability and may result in Council being able to allocate resources to additional reserves or species. Overall, the project continues to receive a high volume of interest and would benefit from additional resource and capacity to better serve the Dunedin community.

We appreciate you taking the time to read our submission and look forward to being able to provide further detail at the hearing. If you have any further questions or comments, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Rhys Millar', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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