

Working towards a Pest Free Kawau

Information guide for the proposed removal of wallabies and possums from Kawau island

June 2024

Kawau is a special place with many natural and cultural values. The island lies within the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park, a hotspot for biodiversity.

The island has the potential to sustain species that require significant space. It already supports important populations of kiwi, weka and pāteke, although these species would thrive in the absence of invasive species. Its proximity to other pest-free islands & sanctuaries would mean that once invasive species are removed, many native bird species could arrive naturally. Kākā are steadily establishing on the Island and there have been anecdotal sightings of bellbirds & kākāriki at the northern end of the Island.

There are several benefits from removing browsing pests (wallabies and possums) from Kawau Island, such as forest recovery and regeneration and climate resilience, which are discussed in the questions and answers below.

You can also find more information about the project overall in our project brochure on our website at www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/kawau-island

Context

We have prepared this guide based on current information and the council's preferred suite of tools and resources that are being developed in a draft operational plan.

This plan will continue to be updated following completion of the private property landowner agreements process and the establishment of the ground-based operations field team. We will take an adaptive management approach, and there may be adjustments to timelines, tools and methods with lessons learnt incorporated into the project as the eradication progresses.

The eradication programme will begin only after the preparation phase has been completed and when the inter-agency coordination group is satisfied that everything is in place to ensure the project's success.

1. Why remove wallabies and possums?

Wallabies and possums have a heavy browsing impact on the native ecosystems of New Zealand. Wallabies selectively browse on native forest seedlings, destroying understory vegetation and reducing food and habitat for native species. Their grazing habits hinder the growth of native bush, disrupt biodiversity by altering forest composition, and contribute to erosion and water quality issues.

Efforts to control wallabies are both expensive and ongoing. On the mainland, wallabies cause extensive damage to farmland and commercial forests, competing with livestock for feed and leading to economic losses. Similarly, possums prey on native birds and their eggs, as well as consuming vegetation, diminishing native plant regeneration and altering forest ecosystems, resulting in overall habitat degradation.

2. What are the preferred methods for the wallaby and possum operation?

Removal of wallabies and possums will be conducted in accordance with animal welfare guidelines and using best practice methods.

- A team of professional hunters, trappers, dog handlers, mapping/GIS experts and drone pilots will be employed to remove wallabies and possums.
- As is the case now on Kawau, professional hunting will be a key tool used to remove wallabies.
- A combination of trapping, bait stations and hunting will be used to remove possums.
- If agreed to by individual landowners, targeted toxins deployed in bait and/or feeder stations (to minimise risk to non-target species) may be used in areas where large groups of wallabies are known to inhabit.
- There are no plans or intentions to use Brodifacoum on wallabies on Kawau Island.
- Raised off the ground possum traps are the preferred trapping method to avoid non-target species.
- Dogs trained to detect wallabies and possums will assist the teams. They will survey blocks to inform areas are free of wallabies and possums before moving to the next block.
- Wildlife cameras will be used to detect animals and track the progress of the operations.
- Drones with a thermal detection camera will be used to locate animals, particularly around coastal cliffs and inaccessible areas.

3. Who will be doing the work?

We will follow a procurement process to establish the formation of a ground-based operations team. The team is likely to consist of a mix of professional hunters, trappers, dog handlers and drone operators.

4. Will the Pohutukawa Trust be involved?

The council will continue to work with the Pohutukawa Trust about what role they will take in the operation. Carl Weaver, chair of the Pohutukawa Trust, is one of three community representatives on the steering group, as well as being an active participant in the operations group and the community forum.

5. How can I manage my pets during the wallaby and possum operation?

Every pet is different, and as an owner, you know best how to manage your pet's safety. There is a risk to dogs that tend to scavenge, particularly during operations in your area. Communication is key and you will be kept informed about the specific areas where toxins would be used. Any uneaten bait and carcasses that can be retrieved, will be actively collected and disposed of by a member of the field team. Communicating when and where toxins are used is important so pet owners can take extra safety precautions.

For Permanent Residents with Dogs: It is advisable to confine your dog, and when out walking use a lead and a muzzle in the designated risk areas. If you need help keeping your pet safe, please ask the project team for assistance.

For Occasional Visitors with Dogs: If you have the option, we recommend that you avoid bringing your dog to the island during the operational period.

6. How can the local community be involved?

The success of this project depends on the support and involvement of Kawau Island's community. Auckland Council is committed to working with you, keeping you up to date, and listening to your feedback.

Here's how you can get involved:

- **Stay informed:** Attend community meetings, such as the monthly community forum or bi monthly KIRRA meetings, read updates, and get involved in discussions.
- **Volunteer:** Join in local pest animal and plant control efforts and become a steward of the island. Visit www.kawauisland.org/associations for more information on community groups such as the Pohutukawa Trust, Kawau Community Conservation Trust and Tiaki o Kawau.
- **Check your gear for pests:** Before your leave the mainland, check and clean your gear. Freshly pack belongings and food into sealed bags or containers. Look for plague skinks and ants that can crawl in. Visit www.doc.govt.nz/pestfreehaurakigulf for more information.
- **Voice your opinion:** Share your thoughts, concerns, and suggestions with us or your community representatives to help shape the project.
- **Your community representatives are:**
 - Carl Weaver – Chair of the Pōhutukawa Trust
 - Michael Wheatcroft – Chair of Kawau Island Residents and Ratepayers Association
 - Jon Bilger – Chair Kawau Island Community Forum

Local accommodation, transport and support from the Pohutukawa Trust, Kawau Island Conservation groups and Ngāti Manuhiri are essential to the success of the project.

7. Are weeds likely take off after wallabies are removed?

What impact the project might have on weeds is an important consideration. Assessment and vegetation monitoring will be integral in highlighting which weed species could be targeted. Auckland Council has completed a weed impact assessment and we are currently drafting a management strategy so it can be incorporated into the proposed project. As the forest understory regenerates and native species flourish, the island is expected to become more resilient to weeds. On other islands where browsers have been removed, this has been the case.

8. What will the removal of wallabies do to the island's fire risk?

Many native plant species currently missing from Kawau's forest understory have a low flammability in contrast to the manuka and kanuka canopy which is high fire risk. As they regenerate, the island will slowly revert to a coastal broadleaf forest which is naturally less flammable, and humidity and soil moisture levels will improve, further reducing the risk of ignition. Biodiversity recovery and the re-establishment of ecosystem processes are expected to result in a more resilient ecosystem that can better withstand future climate change impacts.

9. How is the project being funded?

Securing third-party funding has been essential to the viability of this project. In addition to funding from Predator Free 2050, Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) and in-kind support from the Department of Conservation (DOC), some private landowners have also made a significant contribution to the project which is being held by the New Zealand Nature Fund as part of their fundraising portfolio. The project team have been exploring funding options from the Crown as well as non-government funding.

10. What about rats and stoats?

At this stage, operational planning is focused on the removal of the wallabies and possums. Addressing eradication of rats and stoats (if stoats are present) will be revisited and further discussions will continue with the community as we look ahead to how we can work together to plan and deliver the next stage of the programme. By deferring the timeline for the rodent phase, we will be able to realise and track the benefits of removing the wallabies and possums first and allow additional time to work with the community on concerns specific to the rodent phase.

11. Will any wallabies be kept in an enclosure on the island?

The project team has contacted a number of zoos and wildlife parks to gauge interest in exhibiting Kawau wallabies. Feedback from Australian Conservation authorities is that Kawau wallaby genes have been appropriately represented in the Australian population from previous reintroductions into the captive breeding programme.

Additionally, wild-caught wallabies are particularly vulnerable to stress and associated health issues and don't thrive in captivity without a reasonable amount of care. Most zoos prefer to exhibit captive-bred or hand-reared wallabies unless there is a conservation reason for keeping a wild population.

The project team have also been in contact with MPI, the authority that issues permits for wallabies in captivity, to obtain information on the containment standards and permit process and look at what support might be required for applications to hold wallabies on private land by interested parties.

12. What safety measures will be implemented?

Stringent safety protocols will be in place to protect residents, pets, and non-target wildlife. This includes regular notifications to residents and landowners as outlined in your individual landowner agreement. The field team is obliged to work under strict compliance with environmental legislation and public health regulations.

13. What impact might the project have on daily life and recreational activities?

There will be no disruption to ferry schedules or on-island business operations, such as the KBC Restaurant, Mansion House Cafe, and accommodation facilities. A lot of the work will be happening at night, so it is of the utmost importance to the project team that we keep landowners well-informed, especially during active ground-based operations. This ensures that landowners, particularly those with dogs, are aware of exactly when and where operations (e.g., professional hunting in specific areas, targeted use of toxins) are taking place. This information allows landowners to maintain their usual routines on the island or plan their visits around active operational periods.

14. How are you going to determine the success of the operation?

Success will be measured by the absence of any signs of possums and wallabies. Monitoring for individual wallabies and possums will continue for up to approximately two years after the last individuals are removed. Surveillance and monitoring tools include:

- **Community eyes and ears:** Your sightings of wallabies and possums will be pivotal in confirming their presence or absence. Email kawauislandproject@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz or call 09 3010101 to report sightings, noting time, location and any other details about the animal you can provide.
- **Wildlife cameras:** Will be placed in a network across the island which will help detect wallaby and possum presence and absence. Cameras may also be moved around to 'hotspots' where we suspect animals remain.
- **Aerial wallaby and possum surveillance by drone:** In suitable habitats, drones can be used to detect animals and are helpful in surveying steep coastal cliff areas.

- **Artificial intelligence (AI) processing:** AI will be used to check the footage from the cameras to make it faster to analyse the presence and locations of wallabies and possums.
- **Wallaby and possum indicator dogs:** Indicator dogs and their handlers will check areas for wallaby and possum presence.
- **Wax tags or chew cards:** Identifies animal presence (possums) by tooth impressions.
- **Environmental DNA:** This relatively new technique is used to detect traces of genetic material in water or soil and is useful to provide confidence of absence. For example, if no possums or wallabies have been detected for a period of time, we should expect no traces of their DNA in water or soil.

15. How will the project ensure the protection of culturally significant sites and practices on Kawau Island during the pest removal operations?

Ngāti Manuhiri are a project partner and have produced a Cultural Values Assessment that addresses the protection of culturally significant sites, accidental discovery protocols and practices to ensure cultural safety while working on the island.

16. Who should residents contact for more information or if they have further questions?

Residents can contact the Auckland Council project team by emailing kawauislandproject@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz

17. What is the estimated timeline of the operation?

From site preparation to wallaby and possum removal and confirmation of absence, it is estimated the operation will take approximately 24 months. However, there may be the need for some flexibility to the schedule, with possible date adjustments, including revisiting ‘hot spot’ areas of wallaby and possum activity.