New Zealand’s Climate and Environmental Policy Reversals: Legislative, Regulatory, and Microclimatic Rollbacks

This document details the key legislative repeals, regulatory rollbacks, and policy realignments enacted by New Zealand’s coalition government since late 2023. Spanning six core sectors, from transport infrastructure and energy generation to urban canopy protections and local adaptation, it highlights the structural shifts altering the nation's climate trajectory, environmental safeguards, and localised heat mitigation capacity.

1. Transport and Infrastructure

- **Reversal of Speed Limit Reductions:** Through the Land Transport Rule: Setting of Speed Limits 2024, speed limits previously lowered on state highways and urban roads were raised back (e.g., returning to 100 km/h and 50 km/h) while limiting local council authority to permanently lower limits around school zones, leading to higher fuel consumption and emissions.
- **Repeal of the Clean Car Discount:** Repealed the "feebate" scheme, which provided rebates for electric (EV) and hybrid vehicles while levying charges on high-emission vehicles.
- **Relaxation of Clean Car Standards:** Efficiency requirements for light vehicle importers were lowered, easing compliance targets for vehicle emissions.
- **Shift in Transport Funding Priorities:** The Government Policy Statement (GPS) on Land Transport reallocated capital away from public transport, rail, walking, and cycling infrastructure to prioritise major highways (Roads of National Significance).
- **Cancellation of the Auckland Regional Fuel Tax:** Ended the dedicated tax stream intended to fund light rail, busways, and active transport networks in Auckland.

2. Energy, Resources and Environmental Planning

- **Reversal of the Offshore Oil and Gas Ban:** Introduced legislation to overturn the 2018 ban on new offshore oil and gas exploration to encourage further fossil fuel development.
- **Fast-Track Approvals Regime:** Enacted fast-track approvals legislation to streamline consenting processes for major infrastructure and resource extraction projects (including coal mining and quarrying) by bypassing standard environmental planning procedures.

- **Exclusion of Agriculture from the ETS:** Amended the Climate Change Response Act 2002 to permanently remove biological agricultural emissions (methane and nitrous oxide) from pricing under the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS).
- **Limiting Tort Liability for Emissions:** Enacted the Climate Change Response (Tort Liability) Amendment Act to establish a statutory bar against civil climate litigation for greenhouse gas emissions.

3. Climate Targets and Governance Frameworks

- **Methane Target Adjustments:** Initiated reviews to lower the 2050 biogenic methane reduction target from its previous 24–47% range.
- **Decoupling ETS from International Commitments:** Passed legislation removing the statutory requirement that ETS settings must "accord with" New Zealand's commitments under the Paris Agreement (Nationally Determined Contributions / NDCs).
- **Changes to Climate Governance & Advisory Functions:** Introduced amendments through the Climate Change Response Amendment Bill to alter the independent Climate Change Commission's public consultation requirements and advice mechanisms regarding Emissions Reduction Plans (ERPs).
- **Extension of Public Sector Targets:** Extended the deadline for public sector agencies to achieve carbon neutrality under the Carbon Neutral Government Programme from 2025 to 2050.

4. Education and Corporate Disclosure Directives

- **Curriculum Refocus:** Refreshed the national curriculum to prioritise foundational literacy and numeracy, removing standalone climate change activism and environmental resources from core learning guidance.
- **Relaxation of Mandatory Climate Reporting:** Raised financial turnover thresholds for corporate climate-related disclosures, significantly reducing the number of businesses required to report emissions and climate risk exposure.

5. Local Government and Adaptation Pressures

- **Core Services Mandate:** Instructed local councils to concentrate funding on "core infrastructure" (water, roads, waste management), placing budgetary pressure on regional and district councils to scale back local climate mitigation, adaptation planning, and sustainability staffing.

- **Repeal of Spatial Planning Frameworks:** Repealed the Natural and Built Environment Act and Spatial Planning Act, unwinding regional spatial frameworks intended to integrate long-term climate adaptation into land-use planning.
- **Managed Retreat Funding Shifts:** Signalled a reduction in central government funding for post-event property buyouts, shifting long-term adaptation and legal exposure increasingly onto local councils and private property owners.

6. Urban Canopy, Vegetation and Microclimate Protections

- **Removal of Urban Tree Protection Controls:** Unwinding environmental planning frameworks strictly limits councils from enacting blanket urban tree protection rules on private land, restricting municipal oversight primarily to individually listed "Notable Trees."
- **Loss of Transpirational Cooling Capacity:** Facilitating the removal of mature canopy trees during urban infill development compromises shade and evaporative cooling, escalating localized "urban heat island" effects during peak summer temperatures.
- **Suspension of Significant Natural Areas (SNAs):** Halted council mandates to identify and protect new SNAs under the National Policy Statement for Indigenous Biodiversity, removing regional oversight over vulnerable natural habitats and green corridors.
- **Rollback of Freshwater Management Regulations:** Paused and replaced National Policy Statements on Freshwater, loosening riparian planting and stock exclusion mandates that previously maintained shade cover and microclimate stability along waterway margins.