

Work Plan for the Rotoehu Ecological Trust

July 2026 – June 2027

The Rotoehu Ecological Trust (RET) works in partnership with the Department of Conservation (DOC) and iwi to protect and enhance the ecological condition of approximately 2,049 hectares of indigenous forest within Rotoehu Forest, located in the Bay of Plenty. The forest holds important cultural and historical significance for Ngāti Mākino, Ngāti Pīkiao, Ngāti Awa, and Tūwharetoa ki Bay of Plenty, with Ngāti Mākino supporting DOC's kōkako recovery efforts and other conservation outcomes in the area.

RET plays a key role in protecting and supporting one of the most significant North Island kōkako populations in Aotearoa. The work RET does also has significant benefits for other indigenous flora and fauna. For example, the forest provides important populations for other indigenous bird species, as well as pekapeka/bats.

This collaboration has delivered outstanding conservation outcomes. The managed kōkako population has increased from 157 birds in 2013 to 592 birds in 2023. In recognition of this success with kōkako the Trust received an award from the Kōkako Recovery Group in 2024.

OBJECTIVES

Between 2014 and 2020, pest control operations were implemented on a three-year operational cycle, consisting of:

- Year 1: aerial application of 1080
- Year 2: ground-based pest control operations
- Year 3: a toxin-free, monitoring year

Since 2021, the Rotoehu Ecological Trust has added an additional toxin operation in year three of this cycle, ensuring annual pest control across a minimum of 1,494 hectares. To date this has proved to have been very successful for kōkako. RET has funding to maintain this cycle of management through to the end of 2028. The year three of the operation cycle could be reviewed after this time (beyond 2029) based on evidence of the continued success of the management programme. RET is progressively expanding its managed area and intends to reach 2,049 hectares of active pest control by the 2027 Spring Rat Control Operation.

Primary Objectives of the Rotoehu Ecological Trust

1. Species Protection

In 2013 when RET was established, the Trust aimed to have 200 breeding pairs of kōkako under management. This has been achieved, with the most recent monitoring results show strong progress, with the 2023 survey finding 232 breeding pairs now under active management.

Building on this success, RET's next goal is to expand the managed area to approximately 2,000 hectares, aligning with the strategic objectives of the Kōkako Recovery Group. This increase in managed area aims to provide greater resilience for the kōkako population and protection against unforeseen events. This area refers specifically to RET's two-year ground-based pest control programme/one-year aerial 1080 and excludes a further c.600 hectares that are treated through the Department of Conservation's three-yearly aerial 1080 operations.

This expansion will protect spill-over territories where kōkako populations are naturally expanding, while also supporting the long-term goal of establishing habitat connectivity between populations, including potential links with the Manawahe kōkako population. RET is a key stakeholder in the Kōkako Ecosystem Expansion Programme (KEEP), which is working to link these two populations.

In addition to kōkako protection, sustained pest control is expected to support the recovery and distribution of other indigenous species, particularly indigenous birdlife and pekapeka/bats within the forest ecosystem.

2. Ecosystem Recovery

To support the recovery and resilience of indigenous forest ecosystems, RET undertakes sustained control of introduced pest species.

These efforts aim to:

- Restore natural forest structure
- Improve regeneration of native plant species
- Protect forest-dependent wildlife
- Maintain key pest populations (rodents/possums) at the lowest feasible levels over 2000 hectares or more

Over time, this aims to enhance the long-term ecological health and stability of the Rotoehu Forest ecosystem.

3. Community Engagement

To increase public awareness and community involvement in the Rotoehu Ecological Trust project.

RET actively works to:

- Engage volunteers in conservation activities
- Encourage local community participation
- Enhance its relationship with Ngāti Mākinō
- Build partnerships with organisations and landowners
- Promote the importance of kōkako conservation and forest restoration

Community involvement remains a central pillar of the Trust's work, helping ensure long-term support for the restoration of the Rotoehu ngahere.



Insurance

This project is covered by RETs insurance.

PROPOSED WORK PLAN

The Department of Conservation (DOC) plans to undertake an aerial 1080 operation across Rotoehu Forest in Spring 2026.

As DOC will be undertaking aerial pest control across the entire area currently managed by the Rotoehu Ecological Trust (RET), there is no requirement for RET to undertake a separate ground-based toxin operation during this period. Where possible, RET will assist DOC with aspects of the operation.

This long-term programme of sustained pest control, particularly when combined with periodic aerial 1080 operations, has proven highly effective in increasing kōkako populations and improving ecosystem health within Rotoehu Forest and at other comparable sites, including Hunua Ranges.

The Rotoehu kōkako population is classified as a Priority One Site, defined as a relict mainland population with a minimum bottleneck size of 40 kōkako. Historically, the population had a minimum estimated size of approximately 50 birds, making it the third largest mainland kōkako population at the time, behind:

- Pureora Forest Park – approximately 138 birds
- Te Urewera – approximately 99 birds

As of 2023, Rotoehu now supports the second largest mainland kōkako population in New Zealand, behind Pureora.

MONITORING

Rat Monitoring

Rat monitoring will be undertaken by DOC as part of the aerial 1080 operation with the post operation monitoring occurring as close to the 1st of November to meet the Kōkako Recovery Group reporting requirements.

Possum Monitoring

Possum monitoring will be undertaken by DOC as part of the aerial 1080 operation.

Tītīpounamu (Rifleman)

Discussions with John Heaphy (DOC Tauranga) suggest that Rotoehu may support one of the most significant populations of tītīpounamu in the Bay of Plenty.

RET proposes to:

- Undertake informal monitoring for family groups
- Install nest boxes in suitable areas
- Deploy additional pest control traps where appropriate

A more formal survey may be undertaken alongside the next kōkako census, with methodology currently being developed by John Heaphy. RET currently records locations of sighted (not heard) tītīpounamu

Bat / Pekapeka Monitoring

During 2025, RET deployed a single AR5 acoustic recorder across three locations.

All locations recorded both species of native bats:

- Short-tailed bats

- Long-tailed bats

Additional surveying is planned, with the potential for a full survey if sufficient recorders can be sourced.

Kōkako Census

A full kōkako census is planned for Autumn 2027.

Survey methodology will be developed in collaboration with the Kōkako Recovery Group. As the Rotoehu population has now exceeded the 500 bird milestone, comprehensive full-population surveys may no longer be necessary at the same frequency previously required for population establishment and recovery monitoring.

RET is therefore exploring a monitoring approach that combines:

- Sub-sample monitoring within long-established management areas
- Full surveys within newly established management areas

This approach aims to maintain meaningful population trend data while reducing the significant time and financial costs associated with undertaking full forest-wide surveys.

RET currently has \$40,000 allocated toward the 2027 survey, although additional funding may still be required depending on the final methodology adopted.

A longer-term kōkako monitoring strategy should also be developed to ensure any future population declines can be identified early without requiring unnecessary large-scale surveys.

At the same time, understanding and communicating kōkako population trends remains extremely valuable.

Demonstrating the continued growth and success of the Rotoehu population is important for:

- Supporting funding applications
- Maintaining volunteer engagement
- Demonstrating conservation outcomes
- Informing future management decisions

Population data also helps RET continue telling the story of the recovery of one of New Zealand's most significant mainland kōkako populations.

Bird Counts

Five-minute bird counts may be undertaken, with records submitted to eBird.

DOC AI Cameras

RET currently operates five DOC AI cameras across the main management areas within Rotoehu Forest.

These cameras are:

- Serviced every two months
- Data uploaded to the Cacophony Project

Access to this data can be provided upon request.

Other Records

Additional biodiversity observations are recorded in iNaturalist.

Project data can be viewed at:

<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/rotoehu-ecological-trust>

BAIT LINES AND BAIT STATIONS

During 2026:

- Bait lines will be maintained by volunteers and contractors
- Philproof bait stations will be checked for stability and function
- Stations will be cleaned or replaced as required

All bait stations will be raised to 1 metre height (due to recent weka detections within Rotoehu Forest) before they are next used for a pest control operation. Currently only RF3b bait stations are at the 1 metre height meaning approximately 1700 bait stations need to be lifted.

MAPS

All operational maps are up to date.

Maps are available via:

<https://gisslnz.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/basic/index.html?appid=a72243ae1de74692b35dedd88a72f5b7>

VOLUNTEER WORKDAYS

Planned workdays for 2026:

- Saturday 14 March – Volunteer workday
- Saturday 11 April – Volunteer workday
- Saturday 9 May – Volunteer workday
- Saturday 13 June – Volunteer workday
- Saturday 11 July – Volunteer workday
- Sunday 2 August – Rotorua Botanical Society field trip
- Saturday 8 August – Volunteer workday
- Saturday 12 September – Volunteer workday
- Saturday 10 October – Volunteer workday
- Saturday 14 November – Volunteer workday

More information:

<https://kokako.kiwi/events/>

IWI CONSULTATION

A copy of this work plan will be provided to Ngāti Mākino.

RET welcomes and encourages active involvement from Ngāti Mākino in the project.

DATA COLLECTION

RET will record:

- Volunteer observations
- Additional ecological monitoring data
- Data from AR5, game cameras and DOC AI cameras

This information can be provided to DOC or other interested parties upon request.

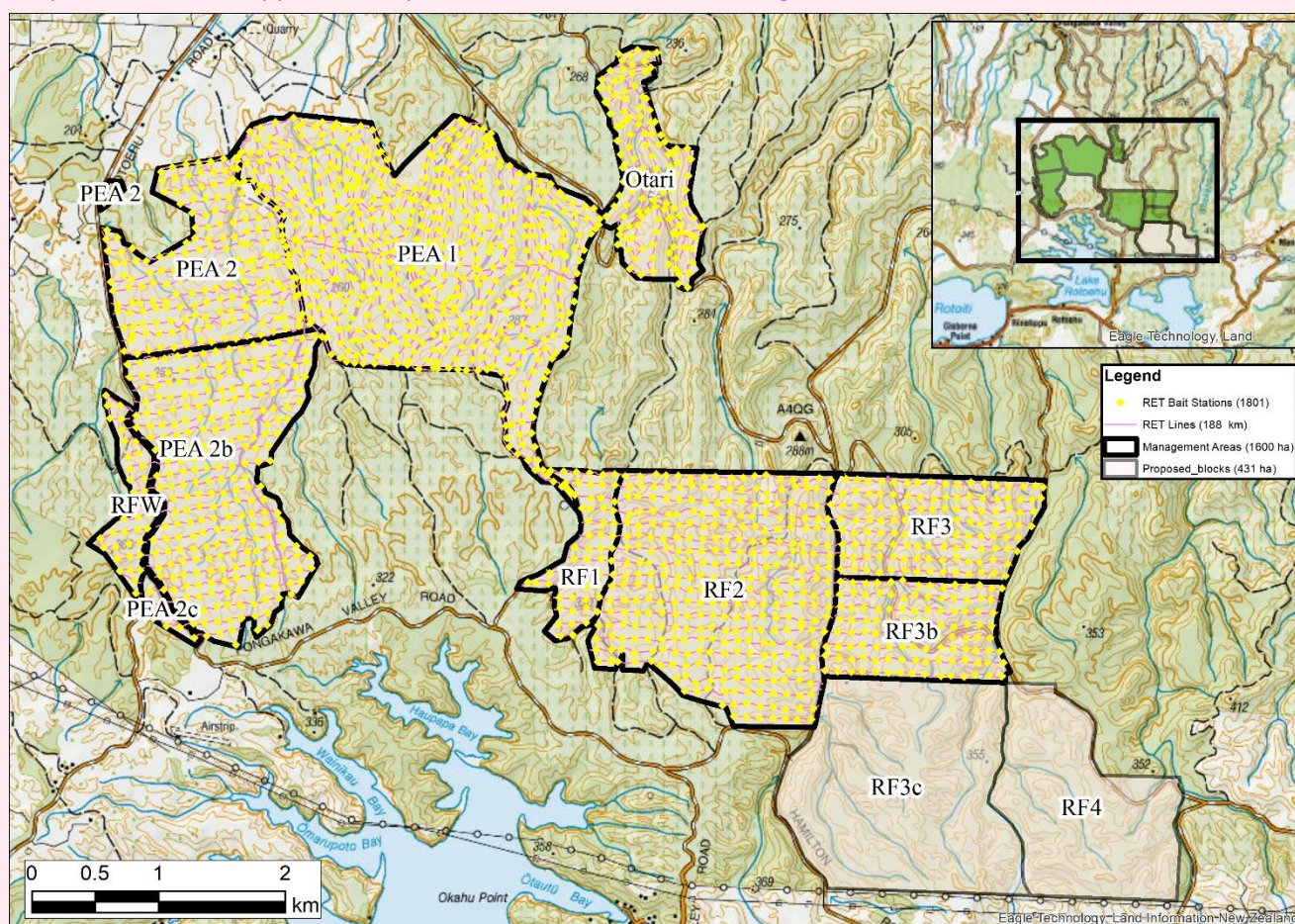
RET requests that DOC provide:

- Pre-operation rat and possum monitoring data
- Post-operation monitoring data - where possible, post-operation rat tracking should occur close to 1 November to meet Kōkako Recovery Group reporting requirements.
- Any additional information that can be publicly used to support funding applications and reporting, including DOC NPCP outcome monitoring data.

NETWORK EXPANSION

Contractors are currently expanding the bait station network eastward toward the Manawahe population, including RF3c and RF4.

This expansion will add approximately 450 hectares to the RET management area.



Current Funded Work

The following work programmes currently have confirmed funding:

TECT – Catalyst for Change Fund

Three years of administration funding to support 12 hours per week of coordination and project management for RET operations.

2027 Autumn Kōkako Survey

Funding of \$40,000 has been secured for the next kōkako census. Additional funding may be required depending on final survey methodology and contractor costs.

Network Expansion – RF3b and RF4

Expansion of the pest control network into RF3b and RF4, extending RET's managed area east toward the Manawahe kōkako population.

Track Cutting Programme

Contractors will undertake track cutting across all management blocks on a three-year cycle, including volunteer-managed areas, to maintain access to bait stations.

2027 Spring Pest Control Operation

Two contractor rounds of RatAbate deployment and removal, including associated permissions, notifications, and compliance requirements.

2028 Spring Pest Control Operation

Three contractor rounds of Pindone deployment, top-up, and removal, including associated permissions, notifications, and compliance requirements.

Proposed Future Work

The following initiatives are projects that the Rotoehu Ecological Trust (RET) would like to undertake in the future, subject to obtaining the necessary approvals and permissions from the Department of Conservation (DOC).

Tītīpounamu (Rifleman) Monitoring

Undertake monitoring of tītīpounamu populations, including the installation and monitoring of nest boxes in suitable habitat areas.

Lizard Monitoring

Use Artificial Cover Objects (ACOs) to monitor lizard presence within the management area. This work would focus on species detection only and would exclude handling of lizards.

Forest Canopy Health Monitoring

Investigate the use of drones to assess and record forest canopy health and changes over time.

Kōkako Call Recording Archive

Record kōkako calls across multiple management blocks to create a long-term acoustic archive of Rotoehu birds for conservation and historical purposes.

Carrie Gibbons Scenic Reserve Opportunities

Explore opportunities for RET to undertake planting and establish a small operational base within Carrie Gibbons Scenic Reserve, subject to existing DOC regulatory authorisations and approvals.

RET remains committed to working collaboratively with DOC, iwi, volunteers, contractors, and partner organisations to protect and restore the ecological values of Rotoehu Forest. Through sustained pest control, monitoring, and community engagement, the Trust aims to ensure the long-term resilience of the Rotoehu kōkako population and the wider forest ecosystem.

