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**SHIFTING GROUND: AN EXPLORATION OF
APPROACHES TO SOIL CONSERVATION UNDER
THE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ACT 1991**

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ABSTRACT

The research considers how and to what extent soil conservation is changing under the Resource Management Act. Case study councils in the Hawke's Bay, Gisborne and Manawatu-Wanganui regions are used to illustrate these changes. A national perspective of the approach and direction councils are taking for soil conservation is also gained from analysis of regional policy statements and regional land management plans.

The dominant underpinnings of soil conservation are examined at an international level. The move from government intervention and regulation, to devolved responsibility and increased public participation has seen a dramatic change in approaches and techniques taken for soil conservation. In New Zealand this shift in management style has been enabled by the environmental administration and legislative reforms of the 1980's. The devolution of responsibility for soil conservation to the regional government level, along with the advent of the Resource Management Act, has changed the focus and the planning process for soil conservation.

Under the Resource Management Act's provisions, soil conservation is included as a management approach to achieve the broader objective of sustainable land management. The emphasis placed by the Act on integrated management has broadened the previously narrow objectives of soil conservation. Councils are observed to be struggling with the complexities involved in integrating natural resource management.

The scope for flexibility within policies and plans has allowed diverse and numerous approaches and techniques to be taken throughout New Zealand for soil conservation. Regional differences have arisen out of this management regime due to physical and institutional differences. Regional differences in the availability of funding and resources are perceived to affect a councils' ability to effectively mitigate soil degradation. Because of these disparities, some councils have been better enabled to tailor new and innovative approaches, while others are inhibited by their regional circumstances.

A common element of all councils' approaches is the move from prescriptive to co-operative style approaches. Such approaches encourage community understanding and commitment to participate in identifying and solving land degradation issues. The research discovers that a combination of co-operative and prescriptive approaches are most successful in achieving land management objectives.

The research shows that regional monitoring needs much improvement to be able to assess the state of the land resource and the consequent success or effect of specific land management approaches. An improved monitoring regime requires regional and central government to work together to gather information and formulate a common set of objectives that can be applied to each region. Processes such as assessing the benefits and costs of approaches, considering alternatives, monitoring outcomes of plans and policies as well as environmental effects, enable councils to formulate comprehensive land management approaches. However, councils need to have the resources and skills, as well as the commitment, to fully undertake these processes.

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