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# Assessment of the Life Cycle-Based Environmental Impacts of New Zealand Electricity

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## ABSTRACT

The life cycle-based environmental impacts of New Zealand electricity arise from the different energy generation systems used to provide electricity to the national grid, and construction, maintenance and operation of the national electricity transmission and distribution system. Due to the high share of hydropower in the New Zealand electricity mix, base load electricity is rainfall dependent and its variable supply is balanced by generation from fossil fuelled power plants, geothermal, and to a lesser extent from wind, biogas and biomass power. This temporal variability of energy sources in the mix changes the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) results for New Zealand electricity when the environmental impacts are assessed over different time periods. Therefore, this research had two main objectives: to conduct an LCA of electricity generation, and to assess the influence of temporal variation in the electricity mix on LCA results. Using the ecoinvent v 3.1 database and New Zealand-specific data, an LCA model of electricity generation and use was developed for the year 2013. The LCA results, using the CML 2001 – Apr. 2013 impact assessment method, showed that coal and natural gas power plants contributed 10 to 90 % in all impact categories. Electricity transmission and distribution (T&D) infrastructure contributed more than 50 % of the result for Abiotic Depletion Potential (ADP), Terrestrial Ecotoxicity Potential (TETP) and Human Toxicity Potential (HTP) impact categories. The Climate Change Potential (CCP) for 1 kWh of low-voltage electricity was 186 g CO<sub>2</sub>-eq; for high and medium-voltage electricity, the CCP results were 172 and 176 g CO<sub>2</sub>-eq per kWh respectively. To investigate the variability in LCA results over different time periods 3, 5 and 10 year moving averages (MAVG) were calculated; as expected, the variability decreased as the time period increased. The analysis showed that the 10 MAVG was associated with the lowest variability in LCA results. However a 10 MAVG will not reflect changes in installed power plant capacity. Therefore for attributional LCA studies of products using electricity over a year-to-year time frame, a representative average of the electricity mix or a 3, 5, or 10 year MAVG can be used as long as there are no changes in installed power plant capacity. This information aids New Zealand's electricity industries understand environmental impacts associated with transitions to renewable energy technologies and meet greenhouse gas reduction targets.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	I
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	II
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	III
LIST OF FIGURES.....	VI
LIST OF TABLES.....	VII
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	X
GLOSSARY .....	X
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 CONTEXT.....	1
1.2 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES.....	3
1.3 APPROACH .....	3
1.4 STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS.....	3
<b>CHAPTER 2 THE LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK – LCA .....</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 GOAL AND SCOPE DEFINITION .....	5
2.2 LIFE CYCLE INVENTORY ANALYSIS – LCI .....	5
2.3 LIFE CYCLE IMPACT ASSESSMENT – LCIA .....	6
2.4 INTERPRETATION.....	6
<b>CHAPTER 3 THE NEW ZEALAND ELECTRICITY GRID .....</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 THE ELECTRICITY MIX .....	7
3.2 THE TRANSMISSION AND DISTRIBUTION NETWORK.....	8
3.3 HYDROPOWER GENERATION IN NEW ZEALAND.....	9
3.3.1 <i>Run-of-River Schemes</i> .....	13
3.3.2 <i>Reservoir-dam</i> .....	13
3.4 GEOTHERMAL POWER GENERATION IN NEW ZEALAND.....	14
3.4.1 <i>Geothermal Flash Power Plants</i> .....	14
3.5 FOSSIL-FUEL RESOURCES IN NEW ZEALAND .....	18
3.5.1 <i>Coal Resources</i> .....	18
3.5.2 <i>Natural Gas Reservoirs</i> .....	18
3.5.3 <i>Oil Deposits</i> .....	19
3.6 FOSSIL-FUEL POWER GENERATION IN NEW ZEALAND .....	19
3.7 WIND POWER GENERATION .....	23
<b>CHAPTER 4 LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT STUDIES OF ENERGY SYSTEMS .....</b>	<b>25</b>
4.1 NEW ZEALAND ELECTRICITY AND ENERGY SYSTEM LIFE CYCLE STUDIES.....	25
4.2 LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT OF FOSSIL-FUEL POWER.....	26

4.3	LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENTS OF HYDROPOWER GENERATION .....	28
4.4	LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT OF GEOTHERMAL ENERGY PRODUCTION .....	30
<b>CHAPTER 5 LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT OF NEW ZEALAND ELECTRICITY: GOAL AND SCOPE DEFINITION AND INVENTORY ANALYSIS.....</b>		<b>34</b>
5.1	GOAL AND SCOPE DEFINITION .....	34
5.1.1	<i>Functional Unit</i> .....	34
5.1.2	<i>System Boundaries</i> .....	35
5.2	INVENTORY ANALYSIS .....	37
5.2.1	<i>Natural Gas Electricity LCI Model</i> .....	37
5.2.2	<i>Coal Electricity LCI Model</i> .....	43
5.2.3	<i>Oil Electricity Model</i> .....	48
5.2.4	<i>Geothermal LCI Electricity Model</i> .....	49
5.2.5	<i>Hydropower LCI Electricity Model</i> .....	54
5.2.6	<i>Wind, Biomass and Biogas Electricity LCI Models</i> .....	56
5.2.7	<i>Electricity Transmission and Distribution (T&amp;D) LCI Model</i> .....	56
5.3	UNCERTAINTY, LIMITATIONS AND COMPLETENESS OF INVENTORY DATA .....	59
<b>CHAPTER 6 RESULTS: LIFE CYCLE IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF ELECTRICITY USE .....</b>		<b>61</b>
6.1	IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF 1 KWH LOW-VOLTAGE ELECTRICITY.....	61
6.2	EFFECTS OF THE T&D NETWORK AND THE ASSOCIATED VOLTAGE TRANSFORMATION .....	67
6.3	THE CARBON FOOTPRINT OF NEW ZEALAND’S ELECTRICITY GRID .....	69
6.4	SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS .....	70
<b>CHAPTER 7 INTERPRETATION OF THE LIFE CYCLE IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF 1 KWH NEW ZEALAND ELECTRICITY .....</b>		<b>75</b>
7.1	INVENTORY ANALYSIS .....	75
7.2	COMPARISON OF CARBON FOOTPRINT RESULTS.....	79
7.3	CONTRIBUTION OF THE T&D NETWORK TO ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS.....	81
7.4	VARIABILITY OF THE LCA RESULTS OVER DIFFERENT TIME SCALES.....	83
7.5	ATTRIBUTIONAL VS CONSEQUENTIAL MODELLING PERSPECTIVES IN LCA OF ELECTRICITY .....	89
<b>CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>		<b>92</b>
8.1	LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT OF 1 KWH NEW ZEALAND ELECTRICITY .....	92
8.2	EFFECTS OF TRANSMISSION AND ASSOCIATED VOLTAGE TRANSFORMATION .....	92
8.3	EFFECTS OF TEMPORAL VARIABILITY IN LCA IMPACT CATEGORY RESULTS .....	93
8.4	ATTRIBUTIONAL VERSUS CONSEQUENTIAL MODELLING PERSPECTIVES IN THE LCA RESULTS.....	93
8.5	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE AREAS OF RESEARCH .....	94
8.6	CONCLUSIONS .....	95

<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1 MBIE ENERGY IN NEW ZEALAND ANNUAL PRODUCTION VOLUMES .....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2 MBIE ENERGY SECTOR GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSION EXCEL WEB TABLES .....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>APPENDIX 3 MBIE FOSSIL FUELS CALORIFIC VALUES .....</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>APPENDIX 4 MBIE NEW ZEALAND ANNUAL ELECTRICITY GENERATION WEB TABLES .....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>APPENDIX 5 WAIKATO REGIONAL COUNCIL CONSENT MONITORING REPORTS .....</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>APPENDIX 6 NEW ZEALAND ELECTRICITY BALANCES AND TRANSMISSION LOSSES .....</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>APPENDIX 7 HOT SPOT ANALYSIS SUBSTANCE QUANTITIES.....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>APPENDIX 8 MBIE COMBUSTION EMISSION FACTORS .....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>APPENDIX 9 GRID MIX ANALYSIS 1990 – 2014.....</b>	<b>125</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 New Zealand Electricity Mix for the Year 2013. Source: MBIE 2014b .....	8
Figure 2 Geographic Location of New Zealand Grid Connected Hydropower Generation Stations .....	11
Figure 3 Geographic Location of New Zealand Geothermal Generation Stations .....	16
Figure 4 Geographic Locations of New Zealand Fossil-Fuelled Generation Stations .....	21
Figure 5 Geographic Locations of Windfarms in New Zealand 2015.....	23
Figure 6 New Zealand Electricity Model using GaBi® LCA Software. Note: Solar was excluded from the current analysis as it contributes only 0.04% of the total mix. ....	36
Figure 7 New Zealand Natural Gas Electricity LCI Model .....	39
Figure 8 New Zealand Coal Electricity LCI Model .....	44
Figure 9 New Zealand Oil Electricity LCI Model.....	48
Figure 10 New Zealand Geothermal LCI Model.....	51
Figure 11 New Zealand Hydropower LCI Model.....	55
Figure 12 Life Cycle Environmental Impacts of 1 kWh Low-Voltage Electricity. ....	61
Figure 13 Life Cycle Environmental Impacts of 1 kWh High-Voltage Coal Electricity.....	63
Figure 14 Life Cycle Environmental Impacts of 1 kWh High-Voltage Natural Gas Electricity.....	63
Figure 15 Hotspot Analysis for Substances Contributing More than 1% To Each Impact Category Result for 1kWh New Zealand Low-voltage Electricity.....	66
Figure 16 New Zealand Electricity Carbon Footprint During Generation, High-Voltage Transmission, Medium-Voltage Transmission and Low-Voltage Distribution.....	69
Figure 17 Contribution of Each Power Generation Technology to the Total Grid Carbon Footprint.....	69
Figure 18 Sensitivity Analysis of the New Zealand Electricity LCI Model. ....	74
Figure 19 GWP of Individual Energy System Feeding Electricity into the Grid.....	80
Figure 20 Total Annual Generation of New Zealand Electricity From Different Sources Between 1990 and 2014.....	83
Figure 21 Variability in LCIA Results for Low-Voltage Electricity Supply due to Annual Changes in the Mix, Expected from Seasonal Weather Patterns and Plant Shut-downs for Maintenance and Upgrading, between 1990 and 2014 .....	85
Figure 22 Moving Averages of the Global Warming Potential of 1 kWh Electricity Use over 24 years ....	87
Figure 23 Change in Installed Capacity from 1990-2014. Source: MBIE, 2014b .....	88
Figure 24 Scenario Analysis for the New Zealand Electricity Grid for the Year 2040 Considering Three Alternative Production Mixes.....	90

Figure 25 Carbon Footprint of the Scenario Analysis for the Year 2040 .....	90
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## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 New Zealand Grid Connected Hydropower Generation Stations, Date Commissioned, Owner, Type of Scheme and Dam, Rated Output, Annual Generation and Capacity Factors. ....	12
Table 2 New Zealand Geothermal Generation Stations, Date Commissioned, Plant and Generation Technology Used, Capacity Factors and Annual Generation 2015.....	17
Table 3 Share of Geothermal Technology used in New Zealand for Electricity Generation. ....	18
Table 4 Fossil-Fuelled Generation Stations in New Zealand, Commissioned Date, Owner, Fuel, Type of Thermal Technology, Rated Output, Capacity Factor, Annual Generation. ....	22
Table 5 Wind Farms, Date Commissioned, Owner, Turbine Technologies, Rated Outputs, Capacity Factors and Average Annual Generation.....	24
Table 6 Sources of Information Used to Adapt New Zealand Specific Emissions Values .....	37
Table 7 Exploration, Extraction and Production Emissions Associated with the Production of Natural Gas Used for Electricity Generation in 2013. ....	39
Table 8 Natural Gas Transmission and Distribution Emissions for the year 2013.....	40
Table 9 Natural Gas Power Plant Turbine Technology Used for Electricity Generation in New Zealand, During 2013. Based on Table 4, Section 3.6 .....	42
Table 10 Natural Gas Combustion Emission Factors per kWh for the year 2013.....	43
Table 11 GHG Emissions and Parameters Used for the New Zealand Natural Gas Electricity Generation Model in 2013.....	43
Table 12 Coal Combustion Emissions for the year 2013. ....	47
Table 13 Summary of New Zealand Specific Life Cycle Emissions for Coal Electricity in the year 2013....	48
Table 14 Fuel Oil Combustion Emissions Factors in 2013. ....	49
Table 15 CO <sub>2</sub> and CH <sub>4</sub> Emission Factors for Electricity Produced From Geothermal Power in the Year 2013.....	52
Table 16 Minimum and Maximum Values of Atmospheric Emissions of Four Geothermal Fields in Italy. ....	52
Table 17 Average Annual H <sub>2</sub> S and Hg Emission Factors for Six Geothermal Power Plants in New Zealand. ....	53
Table 18 Contact Energy Annual Geothermal Generation, Annual Discharge of Arsenic into the Waikato River and Estimated Arsenic Emissions Factors. ....	53
Table 19 Sulphur Dioxide and Nitrogen Oxides Geothermal Emission Values Used for the Geothermal Electricity LCI Model for the Year 2013. ....	54

Table 20 Relative Share of Electricity Generated by Reservoir and Run-of-River Hydropower Plants. ....	55
Table 21 Comparison of New Zealand and Swiss Transmission and Distribution Network, Voltage Levels and Lengths. ....	57
Table 22 Estimation of Transmission and Distribution Losses of the New Zealand Electricity Grid. ....	58
Table 23 Life Cycle Impacts per 1 kWh New Zealand Electricity at High, Medium and Low-Voltage Levels for the Year 2013.....	68
Table 24 Percentage Increase in Impact Category Result When Stepping Down Electricity from High-Voltage Without T&D Infrastructure to Low-Voltage.....	68
Table 25 Comparison between Carbon Footprint Study (Coehlo, 2011) and Present LCA Study for the New Zealand Electricity Grid .....	75
Table 26 Variability of LCA Results over 24 Year Period Using 3, 5 and 10 Year Moving Averages .....	86
Table 27 Annual Gas Production Volumes. Source MBIE Energy in New Zealand # 14 Web Tables.....	106
Table 28 Annual Coal Supply, Transformation & Consumption. Source: MBIE Energy in New Zealand #14 Web Tables .....	107
Table 29 Energy Sector Annual Carbon Dioxide Emissions. ....	108
Table 30 Energy Sector Annual Methane Emissions. ....	109
Table 31 Energy Sector Annual Carbon Monoxide Emissions. ....	110
Table 32 Energy Sector Annual Nitrous Oxide Emissions. ....	111
Table 33 Energy Sector Annual Nitrogen Oxides Emissions. ....	112
Table 34 Energy Sector Annual Non-Methane Volatile Organic Compounds Emissions.....	113
Table 35 Energy Sector Annual Sulphur Dioxide Emissions.....	114
Table 36 New Zealand Natural Gas Physical Properties. ....	115
Table 37 Solid Fuel Calorific Values. ....	116
Table 38 Petroleum Calorific Values.....	117
Table 39 Annual Electricity Generation for the Years 1990 – 2013. Source: MBIE, 2015 .....	118
Table 40 Waikato Regional Council Consent Monitoring Reports for H <sub>2</sub> S and Hg Annual Total Emissions Since 1998 and Annual Emissions per kWh electricity generated.....	119
Table 41 Electricity Supply and Demand Energy Balance, Annual Values in GWh.....	120
Table 42 Substance Quantities Contributing More than 1% to CML 2001 – Apr. 2013 Impact Categories from the Production of 1kWh New Zealand Electricity .....	121
Table 43 Electricity Mix for the period 1990 – 2014 based on Annual Net Generation.....	125
Table 44 LCIA Results for the Electricity Mix 1990 -2014 .....	125

Table 45 Moving Averages of LCA Results over 1990-2014 ..... 126

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### INSTITUTIONS

**IEA** = International Energy Agency  
**EA** = Energy Authority  
**MBIE** = Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment  
**MFE** = Ministry for the Environment  
**MED** = Ministry of Economic Development  
**OECD** = Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development  
**BRANZ** = Building Research Association of New Zealand  
**NZGA** = New Zealand Geothermal Association  
**NZWEA** = New Zealand Wind Energy Association

### COUNTRIES

**CH** = Switzerland  
**NZ** = New Zealand  
**DE** = Germany  
**RoW** = Rest of the World  
**GLO** = Global

### LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

**LCA** = Life Cycle Assessment  
**LCI** = Life Cycle Inventory  
**LCIA** = Life Cycle Impact Assessment  
**GHG** = Greenhouse Gases  
**ADP Elements** = Abiotic Depletion Potential of mineral resources  
**ADP Fossil** = Abiotic Depletion Potential of fossil fuel resources  
**AP** = Acidification Potential  
**EP** = Eutrophication Potential  
**FAETP** = Freshwater Aquatic Ecotoxicity Potential  
**GWP** = Global Warming Potential excluding biogenic carbon  
**HTP** = Human Toxicity Potential  
**MAETP** = Marine Aquatic Ecotoxicity Potential  
**ODP** = Ozone Layer Depletion Potential  
**POCP** = Photochemical Ozone Creation Potential  
**TETP** = Terrestrial Ecotoxicity Potential

### POWER AND ELECTRICITY TECHNOLOGIES

**1-Flash** = Single Flash  
**2-Flash** = Double Flash  
**3-Flash** = Triple Flash  
**CCGT** = Combined Cycle Gas Turbine  
**OCGT** = Open Cycle Gas Turbine  
**BORC** = Binary Organic Rankine Cycle  
**CCST** = Conventional Condensing Steam Turbine

**Dec.** = Decommissioned

**H** = Hybrid (referring to the combination of flash and organic cycles in geothermal power production)

**T&D** = Transmission and Distribution Network

**RoR** = Run-of-river hydroelectric power plant

### UNITS

**kg** = kilograms

**CO<sub>2</sub>-eq** = carbon dioxide equivalents

**k** = kilo

**t** = tonnes

**g** = grams

**kWh** = Kilowatt hour.

**GWh** = Gigawatt hours

**MW** = Megawatt.

**m** = metres

**km** = Kilometres

**V** = Volts

**AC** = Alternating Current

**DC** = Direct Current

## GLOSSARY

LCA of energy systems requires a basic understanding of underlying terminology. This Section introduces some of the key concepts and general conventions used throughout this work, so the reader gains a better comprehension of the topic.

**Greenhouse gases (GHGs):** The term refers to gases that contribute to climate change. The main greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), carbon monoxide (CO), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>), nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) and non-methane volatile organic compounds (NMVOCs) and sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>). Sulphur hexafluoride (SF<sub>6</sub>) is a greenhouse gas associated with the distribution infrastructure and therefore is mentioned separately.

**Carbon footprint:** total contribution of different greenhouse gases to potential climate change. It is usually measured by multiplying different quantities of greenhouse gases by their respective Global Warming Potential (GWP). Both “carbon footprint” and “climate change potential” are used throughout this work to refer to the same environmental impact. The unit of measure of the carbon footprint is grams of Carbon Dioxide Equivalents (g CO<sub>2</sub>-eq), being the climate change potential impact associated with emission of greenhouse gases. Another term that appears in the literature is “Life Cycle Greenhouse Gases”.

**Biogenic carbon:** source of carbon that follows the natural flow of the carbon cycle through the biosphere, atmosphere, ocean and lithosphere (EPA, 2014).

**Electricity grid mix:** The “electricity grid” or the “electricity mix” refers to the technologies used to produce high, medium and low-voltage electricity. In New Zealand high-voltage electricity ranges from 400 – 220 kV AC; medium-voltage electricity ranges from 110 – 11 kV AC and low-voltage electricity ranges from 400 – 230 V.

**Capacity factor:** a measure of how efficiently the power plant produces electricity. This index is estimated by dividing the electricity generated in one year, against the total generation if the power plant was operated at its full capacity.

**Abiotic Depletion Potential (ADP Elements):** Impact category that quantifies the depletion potential of non-renewable resources found as elements within the earth's crust. It is defined as the ratio of resource extraction rate and the recoverable reserves of that resource; it is expressed in kg of a reference antimony equivalent (Guinée, 2002).

**Depletion of non-renewable resources (ADP Fossil):** Impact category that quantifies the amount of fossil energy consumed by the system, and is expressed in mega joules (MJ) (Guinée, 2002).

**Acidification Potential (AP):** Environmental impact category that quantifies the potential of pollutants to produce hydrogen ions and therefore, acidification on the environment. Expressed in sulphide dioxide equivalents (Guinée, 2002).

**Eutrophication Potential (EP):** Environmental impact category that quantifies the potential of organic matter, nitrogen and phosphate to cause nutrient enrichment on the environment. Expressed in phosphate equivalents (Guinée, 2002).

**Freshwater Aquatic Ecotoxicity Potential (FAETP):** Impact category that quantifies the potential impact of toxic substances to aquatic ecosystems (Guinée, 2002). Expressed in kg of 1,4-dichlorobenzene equivalents.

**Human Toxicity Potential (HTP):** Environmental impact category that quantifies the potential of toxic emissions to cause health risks in human beings (Guinée, 2002).

**Marine Aquatic Ecotoxicity Potential (MAETP):** Environmental impact category that quantifies the potential of toxic substances to produce damaging effects on marine ecosystems (Guinée, 2002).

**Ozone Layer Depletion Potential (ODP):** Environmental impact category that quantifies the effects of anthropogenic emissions on the reduction of the earth's ozone layer in the stratosphere (Guinée, 2002). It is expressed in kg CFC-11-equivalents.

**Photochemical Ozone Creation Potential (POCP):** Environmental impact category that quantifies the potential formation of reactive chemical compounds by the action of sunlight on volatile organic compounds in the troposphere (Guinée, 2002). Expressed in kg of ethylene equivalents.

**Terrestrial Ecotoxicity Potential (TETP):** Impact category that quantifies the potential impact of toxic substances to terrestrial ecosystems (Guinée, 2002). Expressed in kg of 1,4-dichlorobenzene equivalents.