TE ARAWA LAKES TRUST

MEDIA RELEASE

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Two decades of systemic underfunding forces Te Arawa Lakes Trust to reset

Te Arawa Lakes Trust (TALT) has made the difficult decision to significantly reset its operations after almost two decades of a system that has failed to adequately resource Te Arawa to fulfil the responsibilities arising from the 2006 Te Arawa Lakes Settlement.

The reset will see TALT wind down or rehome a number of operational lake programmes, significantly reduce its workforce and move to a smaller operating model focused on protecting its settlement assets and meeting its enduring statutory and cultural responsibilities.

Chairman Wallace Haumaha says the decision has not been caused by any single event or individual, but is the culmination of a structural problem that has existed since the settlement.

> *"This is not a story of financial mismanagement, nor is it about blaming the people sitting around the table today. It is about fixing a system that has not adequately resourced Te Arawa to carry the responsibilities placed upon us," Mr Haumaha said.*
>
> *"The 2006 settlement returned the beds of our ancestral lakes and created enduring responsibilities for Te Arawa. What it did not provide was an enduring income capable of funding those responsibilities."*

A history almost a century in the making

Mr Haumaha said the present situation needed to be understood in the context of Te Arawa's long relationship with the Crown over the lakes.

In 1922, legislation vested the beds of the Te Arawa lakes in the Crown, extinguishing Te Arawa customary title in return for an annuity and fishing licences. After decades of pursuing redress, including through the Waitangi Tribunal from 1987, Te Arawa signed its Deed of Settlement with the Crown in 2004.

The Te Arawa Lakes Settlement Act 2006 gave effect to the settlement, including the return of 13 of the 14 lakebeds to Te Arawa. It also created enduring responsibilities for TALT as lakebed owner and statutory entity, including participation in co-governance, protection of settlement assets and taonga, advocacy for the hapū who whakapapa to the lakes, and recognition of the traditional relationship of Te Arawa with its ancestral lakes.

> *"The return of our lakebeds was hugely significant, but ownership has to mean more than having our name on a title," Mr Haumaha said.*
>
> *"Te Arawa cannot be expected to carry the responsibilities of ownership and kaitiakitanga while having insufficient influence over the resources required to protect those taonga."*

From partner to cultural adviser

In 2007, a $144 million programme was established to support the restoration of the Rotorua lakes, comprising Crown and council funding.

Under the arrangements subsequently established, TALT was placed in a cultural-adviser role and did not have the ability to allocate Strategy Group funding. Over the following years, the majority of funding was directed towards council-led priorities.

> *"We own the beds of these lakes. They are our ancestral taonga. Yet the system effectively positioned Te Arawa as the cultural voice in the room while control over significant resources and operational priorities largely sat elsewhere," Mr Haumaha said.*
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> *"Our concern is not with the individuals who sit around the table today. Many of them are working with us in good faith. Our concern is with the settings they have inherited, and whether those settings are capable of delivering the partnership envisaged through our settlement."*
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> *"Governments have changed. Ministers have changed. Councillors, mayors, chief executives and officials have changed. The structural problem has remained. This is about the system, not the individuals within it."*

Independent review confirmed change was needed

In 2023, an independent review of the Rotorua Te Arawa Lakes Strategy Group made six recommendations, including reviewing the Crown Funding Deed.

In February 2026, the Strategy Group resolved to prioritise that review, with TALT to lead the work. TALT subsequently worked with its partners to develop a proposal to reallocate $2 million of remaining Crown funding towards Te Arawa-led restoration activity.

The proposal did not proceed due to BOPRC's position. TALT is now pursuing a wider review and amendment of the Funding Deed, including the remaining Crown funding that all RTALSG members have agreed to.

> *"The $2 million was important, but this issue is much bigger than one funding decision," Mr Haumaha said.*
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> *"For years TALT has bridged the gap through commercial dividends, grants, cost recovery, contracts and our own resources. That is no longer sustainable."*

The consequence: TALT must reset

Without an enduring funding solution, TALT forecasts that its operating funds will be exhausted in early September. The Trust has therefore chosen to act while it can still meet its obligations to kaimahi and creditors, rather than allow insolvency to dictate what happens next.

The reset will reduce TALT's operating costs from approximately $3.8 million annually to a minimal operating model of approximately $1.38 million. It will include redundancies, winding down or rehoming operational programmes, reducing liabilities and disposing of operational assets that are no longer required.

The settlement assets – including lakebed titles, taonga and archives – are expressly protected and are not for sale.

> *"This is the hardest part," Mr Haumaha said.*

"We are farewelling good people who have dedicated themselves to these lakes. We are stepping back from mahi our people have seen TALT doing in and around our wai for many years."

"This is not a decision we ever wanted to make. But we owe it to our people to be honest about where we stand and to act now while we can protect the Trust and its assets."

The mahi on our lakes

Over almost two decades TALT has developed significant operational capability around the lakes. Its people have responded to catfish, undertaken lakeweed and biomass removal, supported wetland restoration, planting and pest-control work, and mobilised communities in response to emerging biosecurity threats such as freshwater gold clam.

Some of that mahi will now cease or be rehomed. TALT will work with funders, iwi, hapū and other organisations to identify opportunities for important programmes to continue elsewhere.

"The fact that TALT may no longer directly deliver some of this mahi does not diminish our responsibility to the lakes," Mr Haumaha said.

"Where others can carry the work, we will help make that transition happen. Where the responsibility remains ours under legislation and settlement, we will continue to meet it."

Te Arawa Lakes Trust is not going anywhere

Mr Haumaha said the reset should not be confused with the winding up of the Trust. TALT will continue to hold the lakebeds and settlement assets on trust for Te Arawa and continue to meet its statutory responsibilities.

"Reset is not defeat," Mr Haumaha said.

"We are protecting what our tūpuna fought to have returned. We will continue holding our lakebeds and taonga for Te Arawa, continue meeting our statutory responsibilities and continue advocating for the mana and mauri of our lakes."

"But we cannot accept that the minimum operating model should become the permanent future of Te Arawa Lakes Trust."

Time to revisit the promise of 2006

TALT will now seek an enduring funding arrangement with the Crown and a review of whether the institutional and funding arrangements established following the settlement are capable of delivering its original intent.

"Twenty years after settlement, it is appropriate to ask whether the system has delivered what our people believed they were agreeing to in 2006," Mr Haumaha said.

"We cannot have a model where Te Arawa owns the beds of our ancestral lakes and carries enduring responsibilities for them, but must continually consume its own resources simply to exercise those responsibilities."

"Our purpose has never been confrontation. It has been to protect the mauri of our lakes and to see the partnership promised in our settlement honoured."

“The door remains open. We want to work constructively with the Crown, BOPRC and Rotorua Lakes Council on a system that recognises Te Arawa not merely as a cultural adviser, but as an owner, kaitiaki and genuine decision-making partner in the future of our lakes.”

“Te Arawa has cared for these lakes for generations. We will care for them still.”

ENDS

Media enquiries

Te Arawa Lakes Trust

Tame Malcolm / Kereama Wright

About Te Arawa Lakes Trust

Te Arawa Lakes Trust is the post-settlement governance entity for the Te Arawa lakes, established under the Te Arawa Lakes Settlement Act 2006. It holds 13 of the 14 lakebeds on trust for Te Arawa, carries statutory responsibilities relating to the lakes and is a member of the Rotorua Te Arawa Lakes Strategy Group alongside Bay of Plenty Regional Council and Rotorua Lakes Council.

Editor notes

Timeline – Te Arawa Lakes Settlement, funding arrangements and TALT reset

Date	Event
1922	Legislation vested the Te Arawa lakebeds in the Crown, extinguishing customary title in exchange for an annuity and fishing licences.
1987	Te Arawa pursued its lake claims through the Waitangi Tribunal.
18 December 2004	Te Arawa and the Crown signed the Te Arawa Lakes Deed of Settlement.
2006	The Te Arawa Lakes Settlement Act gave effect to the settlement. The Crown apologised for historical breaches and 13 of the 14 lakebeds were returned to Te Arawa. TALT assumed enduring statutory and cultural responsibilities relating to the lakes.
2007	The Rotorua lakes restoration funding framework was established. The overall programme comprised Crown and council contributions. Under the arrangements that followed, TALT was positioned as a cultural adviser and did not control allocation of Strategy Group funding.
2007-2022	The Crown funding framework was predominantly directed toward council-led water-quality priorities. TALT continued advocating for the funding framework to give effect to both sustainable lake management and Te Arawa's traditional relationship with the lakes.
November 2023	An independent review of the Rotorua Te Arawa Lakes Strategy Group made six recommendations, including review of the Crown Funding Deed.
2025	TALT identified that its operating model was no longer financially sustainable and began a programme of restructuring, cost reductions, revenue generation and funding work.
February 2026	The Strategy Group resolved to prioritise review of the Crown Funding Deed, with TALT to lead the work.
May 2026	TALT progressed a proposal seeking reallocation of $2 million of remaining Crown funding toward Te Arawa-led lake restoration activity.
6 August 2026	BOPRC maintained its earlier resolutions and was unable to support TALT's request to the Minister for the $2 million reallocation. The anticipated funding therefore did not proceed.
August 2026	With no alternative funding of comparable scale available in the immediate term, TALT's forecast showed operating funds being exhausted in early September. The Board moved to implement a managed reset while the Trust could still meet obligations to staff and creditors.
September 2026	TALT begins implementing the reset: reducing its operating model, making redundancies, winding down or rehoming programmes, reducing liabilities and rationalising surplus operational assets. Lakebed titles, taonga and archives remain protected and are not for sale.
Next phase	TALT will pursue review and amendment of the Crown Funding Deed and advocate for an enduring funding arrangement capable of supporting its statutory and cultural responsibilities.

Key figures

- 13 of the 14 Te Arawa lakebeds are held on trust for Te Arawa.

- The Rotorua lakes restoration programme included up to $72.1 million of Crown funding, alongside matching council contributions.
- TALT sought the reallocation of $2 million of remaining Crown funding in 2026.
- The reset reduces TALT's annual operating cost from approximately $3.8 million to approximately $1.38 million.
- Settlement assets – lakebed titles, taonga and archives – are expressly excluded from sale.