

Released by Director-General of the GCSB

Reactive questions and answers

So you have replaced the dishes with mass digital surveillance?

- The GCSB does not undertake “mass surveillance” or anything like it. All the Bureau’s activities and capabilities are subject to robust and independent oversight, particularly by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security.
- Let me be clear, a Royal Commission, Inspector-General and Dame Patsy Reddy and Sir Michael Cullen have all refuted this accusation of “mass surveillance”.
- All GCSB’s intelligence collection activity needs to be undertaken in accordance with the Government’s National Security and Intelligence Priorities and New Zealand law, including our international human rights obligations.

Does this mean the station will close?

- No, the station will continue to operate. The dishes represent a technology that has dwindled in use over the years to a point where they are now virtually obsolete. The Bureau’s technical capabilities have moved on.

Will there be any jobs lost? How many people will be affected? How many people work at the station?

- A very small number of people will be affected by this and we will look to redeploy them elsewhere, where we can. Support is being provided to help those staff step through the process.
- We wouldn’t comment on the number of people we have at the Station for security reasons, other than to say that over the years the number of people who carry out duties associated with the dishes has significantly tapered while staff numbers at the station have increased.

When was the decision to remove the dishes made, and when were the affected people told?

- The decision was made by GCSB leadership and staff were consulted earlier this year.

Who made the decision to remove the dishes?

- The decision was an operational one made by myself [DG] and my senior leadership team.

Can you explain what exactly the dishes did, are you able to elaborate on this?

- Generally speaking, satellite communication interception.
- In addition to intelligence gathering, satellite collection can be used to survey communication systems utilising a particular satellite or identify the satellites servicing an area.
- Each day, there are over a billion pieces of communication carried by the commercial satellites that are visible to the dishes at Waihopai. Yet we are only able, in accordance with the authorities we have in place, to collect a small fraction of those communications. Think about those communications as comprising an Olympic swimming pool, we’re only able to collect a fraction of a single bucket.
- It’s really important to know that everything we collect needs to be in line with the strict rules in the Intelligence and Security Act, it needs to be done under a legal warrant, and it’s subject to robust and independent oversight from the Inspector General of Intelligence and Security.

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- In order to find the specific piece of communications we're after, the proverbial drop in the bucket of communications we've collected, we screen for relevance. Again, in accordance with the authorities we have in place. It's only at that point does one of our staff actually view the communication.

Why exactly are they now not needed?

- The decision to remove the dishes was a straightforward one, especially as we are at a point in the dishes' lifespan where they will require significant structural upgrades in the coming years, which would likely cost millions of dollars (roughly estimated at \$4.5m).
- The dishes represent a technology that has dwindled in use over the years, and has been used less and less to the point where they are barely used at all.
- It's a bit like having an old VHS cassette player in the lounge. It was once well used but its days have come to an end. Technology has moved on.

So, if the dishes dome are part of obsolete technology, what can you say about what we do now.

What have the dishes been replaced with?

- Changes in global telecommunications and information technology and ubiquitous encryption mean interception of satellite communications from Waihopai is no longer a significant source of intelligence collection.
- As we have said, satellite communication interception is only one of the intelligence collection methods that GCSB is permitted to use under the Intelligence and Security Act 2017. GCSB will continue to have the ability to intercept high frequency radio communications, access information infrastructures, seek assistance from telecommunications network operators and service providers, and receive intelligence from its international intelligence partners.

Will the removal of the dishes leave a gap in our intelligence collection ability?

- No. The dishes represent a technology that has dwindled in use over the years to a point where they are now virtually obsolete. Other technology has taken over.

How will the dishes and radomes be removed – and how much will it cost?

- I imagine removal work will require a few cranes and plenty of steel cutting equipment, but I'll leave that part to the experts to comment on.
- Estimated cost is not something we would disclose before we tender for the work. I'll be happy to provide final estimates and costs when we can.
- I would just reiterate that aside from their obsolescence, the other part of the reason why we have taken this decision is that the dishes are reaching a point where they will require significant structural upgrades, or replacement that will likely cost millions of dollars – quite likely more than the removal cost itself.
- Obviously leaving the obsolete dishes and domes where they are is not an option.

What will happen to the dishes, domes and old spy equipment? Will it be taken to the local tip?

- Part of the removal work, including the tendering process, will look at how we safely and securely recycle, salvage or dispose of materials. The appropriate and secure disposal of any sensitive material will be part of this work.

Will the removal of the domes create a carbon footprint?

- This is something we have considered and part of the tendering process to decommission and remove the dishes and domes will take into account

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environmental impact, including recycling materials where possible – as well as safety and security considerations.

- The domes and dishes represent old technology that, as well as becoming more obsolete, it is large and energy inefficient, including the need for noisy equipment to keep the domes inflated.

What condition are the dishes in? How bad are they?

- The domes have reached the end of their structural end-of-life and would require a major overhaul, or even to be replaced all together, where they were to remain operational.

Will the antennae installed in 2007 also be removed?

- That antenna will remain in place for the foreseeable future. There is no pressing structural issue requiring immediate removal.

Will the dish removal disrupt operations at the station and the wider area?

- The tendering and technical planning for the removal work will now gather pace, but work will be planned to fit around operations and for any disruptions to be kept at a minimum.
- The Station is located in a reasonably remote area and we anticipate there will be minimal disruptions to neighbours, apart from some heavy equipment moving on and off the site for a short period of time while the deconstruction work is carried out.

How long will it take and when will it start?

- This is yet to be determined and will be figured out once a contractor is selected to do the job.

What are our Five Eyes partners doing with respect to this sort of technology – are they also knocking down their dishes?

- I can't speak for other intelligence agencies, but generally speaking, the use of this technology has declined across the board.
- Other forms of collection have taken over.

Does this mean we are disinvesting in our Five Eyes relationship? Is this just cost cutting that could harm our position in the partnership? What did the other Five Eyes say? Are they disappointed? Any reaction?

- Not at all. The dish and dome removal is part of the normal evolution and modernisation of an intelligence agency.
- Everything we do is in accordance with New Zealand law and New Zealand government priorities.
- The use of this technology is declining and other collection methods have taken over - our decision to decommission is not a surprising one.
- We have discussed our decision with other members of the Five Eyes. Our Five Eyes partners value our ongoing contribution from our other capabilities, and we receive great benefit from the partnership.

Will you also be looking at any changes at Tangimoana? Or, will there be more changes to any other New Zealand spy infrastructure?

- Tangimoana continues to operate and if we were to make changes in the future, we would look to publicly announce those.

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- Technological acceleration represents a constant challenge, and as new technologies emerge, our intelligence community must be able to evolve capability quickly and seamlessly.
- We will always be assessing and updating capabilities.

The station has been the focus of some controversy over the years including those who have broken onto the Station's grounds and deflated a dome. This controversy also includes accusations that the base was responsible for mass surveillance and that is, in effect, a "US spy base in our midst" – what do you say to these accusations?

- By the legislation, the GCSB exists to protect New Zealand as a "free and open democratic society".
- Everything we do is in accordance with New Zealand law and New Zealand government priorities.
- Also, it has been very well established that we do not, and have never, carried out "mass surveillance".
- Let me be clear, a Royal Commission, Inspector-General and Dame Patsy Reddy and Sir Michael Cullen have all refuted this accusation of "mass surveillance".
- All GCSB's intelligence collection activity needs to be undertaken in accordance with the Government's National Security and Intelligence Priorities and New Zealand law, including our international human rights obligations.
- All the Bureau's activities and capabilities are subject to robust and independent oversight, particularly by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security.

The radomes have attracted strong and vocal opposition over the years – How do you think people will react to the demise of the icon of the New Zealand spy agencies? What do you say to those who react to day's news with "good riddance"?

- Over the past 30 or so years the radomes and dishes have played a very valuable part in helping us keep New Zealand and New Zealanders safe.
- The whole reason why the GCSB exists is to protect New Zealand's way of life – an open, democratic society, which includes the right to peacefully protest.
- All GCSB's intelligence collection activity needs to be undertaken in accordance with the Government's National Security and Intelligence Priorities and New Zealand law, including our international human rights obligations.
- All the Bureau's activities and capabilities are subject to robust and independent oversight, particularly by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security.