

Closures of tracks and areas of PCL&W for visitor safety SOP

About this document

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Document Coordinator	Theo Chapman, Senior Advisor, Visitor Safety System Improvement
Document Owner	Andy Roberts, Visitor Standards and Safety Manager
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1. Background

1.1 Purpose and scope

The purpose of this SOP is to explain how the decision to close a facility, track or area of public conservation lands and waters (PCL&W) on the basis of visitor safety should be made, including what types of hazards and level of risk would trigger a closure. The SOP also sets out the processes for implementing such closures and how closures will be monitored/reviewed.

The SOP is intended to be used by operational staff who are managing visitor destinations on PCL&W. It supports them to make consistent closure decisions that support DOC's national approach and meet legislative requirements for closures (including public notification).

The scope of this document is for closures driven by visitor safety concerns only. It does not cover rahui (see more on this in section 1.2.4) nor closures for other purposes. Changes to visitor groups and reclassification of tracks is also out of scope – find the process for reclassifying tracks in [Change Control Guidelines for Recreation Functional Locations and Destinations](#) (docDM-1569663).

The SOP is intended to be used during normal operating conditions. Closure decisions may be made differently when under a regional or national state of emergency or under other special emergency legislation.

1.2 Introduction/Context

There is a wide range of hazards found on PCL&W, such as adverse weather, flooding, volcanic eruptions, and landslides. In some instances, hazards can generate a level of risk that cannot be tolerated or mitigated, and closures of tracks/facilities/areas are necessary for public safety.

1.2.1 Legislative context

The Minister and Director-General of Conservation, and reserve commissioners, have the power to close areas of PCL&W under the Conservation Act 1987, National Parks Act 1980, Reserves Act 1977 and Walking Access Act 2008, including for reasons of safety and emergency. This authority has been delegated to DOC.

The Conservation General Policy and General Policy National Parks both contain policies for closures for visitor safety purposes. The policies recognise DOC may “notify the closure of a national park or any part of a national park to public entry when it considers there to be imminent danger to people or property that cannot reasonably be avoided by other means.”

At times areas of PCL&W function as a workplace (for example, for DOC staff undertaking track maintenance). In these instances, the Health and Safety and Work Act 2015 applies, and DOC is obligated to identify and mitigate/eliminate the risks of its work to staff, contractors, or visitors.

1.2.2 Principles

Closures are a balancing act between the right of the public to enjoy unfettered access to PCL&W and the need to protect public safety. DOC's approach to closures is guided by the following principles:

- Closures must be consistent with all relevant legislation and general policies.

- Closures protect the public against significant risks that cannot be mitigated in other ways.
- Closures impinge as little as possible on the public's right to access and enjoy PCL&W.
- Closures are communicated clearly, accurately, and transparently. The terms 'closure' and 'closed' are only used for closures authorised under legislation, including regulations and bylaws.
- Closure policies allow DOC to respond quickly and efficiently to significant public safety risks.

1.2.3 Approach to closures

DOC seeks to keep PCL&W open as much as possible. However, there are times when a closure is the only reasonable option to manage significant risk to the public.

We implement closures in the following situations:

- When the risk is higher than acceptable for the site's predominant visitor group and cannot be reduced to an acceptable level with management actions; and/or
- When management actions to reduce the risk to an acceptable level for the site's predominant visitor group will take time to put in place and a closure is required until mitigations are implemented.

Where reasonable, DOC should work to reduce the risks associated with hazards rather than close areas. However, there will be times when this is not possible. There may be no mitigation available to reduce the risk to appropriate levels, the mitigation might not be compatible with management plans or legislation, or the mitigation is not practical or feasible.

In situations with high levels of risk to low-skilled visitors, risk is managed by recommendations to visitors about whether they use the track that day, or facility closures and booking cancellations. These approaches are used very sparingly (for example, on the Tongariro Alpine Crossing and the Fiordland Great Walks).

1.2.4 Rāhui

A rāhui is a temporary prohibition, which places a closure or restriction upon an area, resource, or activity. Rāhui are put in place by mana whenua and are declared for a range of reasons, though generally it allows for tapu to dissipate, time for healing and recovery of the mauri of the physical and spiritual world. Examples of when a rāhui may be declared include following a death, for the protection of people's safety, and for the conservation of resources. They are a physical and spiritual protection mechanism that hapū and iwi can use to support other activities.

DOC supports rāhui by working closely with mana whenua and publicising the rāhui (for example, via a media release and an alert on the DOC website). Authorising a formal legal closure for an area subject to a rāhui is beyond the scope of this SOP. Therefore, rāhui are not legally enforceable against the public, and staff should take care to avoid giving the public this impression.

Rāhui are put in place through a tikanga process rather than a legislative process and applying DOC's visitor safety closure thresholds and processes to rāhui would likely limit DOC's ability to provide efficient and effective support for any rāhui placed. Local DOC teams should work directly with mana whenua to check if a rāhui should be put in place to help respond to any specific needs

to a situation or context. Local teams should also seek advice from the DOC legal team if DOC is being asked to authorise a legal closure of an area to support a rāhui.

1.3 Compliance

Directors are authorised to approve variation from the SOP requirements and are accountable for those decisions. They are required to use their professional judgement and to seek advice, or to escalate when in doubt. All decisions should be documented and any closure that departs from this policy needs Deputy Director-General approval if it is to last more than a week. It is expected that variations from requirements in this SOP will be the exception rather than the norm, and that legal (i.e. legislation and judge-made laws) and health and safety requirements are compulsory. Common sense should prevail in the case of exceptional or emergency field situations.

1.4 Terms and definitions

Term	Definition
Closure	A formal notification to the public that they are not permitted to enter a given area on PCL&W. It is issued under a specific piece of legislation and is legally enforceable.
Hazard	A source of potential harm or a situation with potential to cause loss.
Risk	The chance of a hazard(s) causing harm to a visitor(s). Risk is measured in terms of likelihood and consequence.
Risk Tolerance	The amount of risk that is acceptable for the predominant visitor group at a visitor site. Risk tolerance is defined by DOC's risk evaluation matrices (qualitative assessments) and DOC's natural hazard risk thresholds (quantitative assessments). See the visitor risk management (at visitor sites on public conservation lands and waters) SOP (doc-7555122).
Visitor groups	DOC's segmentation of visitors into six categories – Short Stop Travellers, Day Visitors, Overnighters, Backcountry Comfort Seekers, Backcountry Adventurers, and Remoteness Seekers. Although some visitors can belong to different groups at different times, at any one-time visitors will be in one of these groups. See the visitor risk management (at visitor sites on public conservation lands and waters) SOP (doc-7555122).
Predominant visitor group	The visitor group with the highest numbers using the site.

1.5 Roles and responsibilities

Requirement	Who is accountable?	Why?/Consequence	Links
Prepares closure assessment document and makes recommendation to Operations Manager about action required	Senior Heritage and Visitor Ranger	The Senior Heritage and Visitor Ranger has an in-depth knowledge of the site and is best placed to do the closure assessment. They will then send their recommendation to the Operations Manager.	Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template (doc-7370888)
Approves decision to close, or not to close	Operations Manager	<p>The Operations Manager reviews the closure assessment made by the Senior Ranger. They must approve any closure, ensure that it is justified and that the risk cannot be mitigated another way, and ensure it is in line with this SOP.</p> <p>The Operations Manager should notify the Regional Director of decisions made as soon as possible.</p> <p>To approve a closure under the Reserves Act, the Operations Manager must have been designated as a Commissioner (see list of Commissioners at DOC-2750343). The decision will need to be signed off by a Commissioner if the Operations Manager is not designated as one.</p> <p>Note: if the closure spans multiple districts, all relevant Operations Managers should approve the decision.</p>	Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template (doc-7370888)

Requirement	Who is accountable?	Why?/Consequence	Links
Provides advice on the closure decision	Senior Visitor Safety Advisor	The Senior Visitor Safety Advisor provides support to ensure that a closure is justified and that the risk cannot be mitigated another way. The role is advisory only, the SPA is the Operations Manager.	Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template (doc-7370888) visitorsafety@doc.govt.nz

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2. Criteria for implementing closures, recommendations and facility closures

2.1 Closures

Closures can be short or long-term. This depends on whether the risk is likely to be reduced to a tolerable level in the future, either through natural processes or intervention by DOC.

Regardless of the length of the closure, it still needs to meet a series of criteria. These criteria ensure that we are only restricting the public's use of PCL&W when absolutely necessary.

2.1.1 Closures for tracks/areas of PCL&W

To close a track or an area of PCL&W for visitor safety reasons, the following criteria must be met.

- The track/area is a visitor site/place frequented by visitors on PCL&W; AND
- The risk is higher than acceptable for the site's predominant visitor group and cannot be reduced to an acceptable level with management actions; AND/OR
- Management actions to reduce the risk to an acceptable level for the site's predominant visitor group will take time to put in place and a closure is required until mitigations are implemented.

In these situations, closures can be put in place either

- A. Until the risk has resolved through natural processes
- B. Until DOC has put in place mitigations to lower the risk to an acceptable level for the predominant visitor group.

2.1.2 Disposal of tracks on PCL&W

To dispose of a track (permanently close) for visitor safety reasons, the following criteria must be met.

- The track/area is a visitor site/place frequented by visitors on PCL&W; AND
- The risk is higher than acceptable for the site's predominant visitor group and cannot be reduced to an acceptable level with management actions; AND/OR
- Management actions are not practical or feasible; AND
- The risk is very long-term and will not reduce through natural processes within a reasonable timeframe.

If these criteria are met, the track should be disposed of. A closure should be put in place while the disposal process is worked through.

2.1.3 Closing DOC facilities on PCL&W

The facility should be closed if it is not safe, not sanitary and/or if it has inadequate means of escape from fire. This is determined through engineering and inspection advice.

Note: if an area of PCL&W is closed, then all facilities within it (DOC or third-party) are also automatically closed. Third party access may need to be preserved in some cases where they have access rights and limited alternative options.

2.1.4 Closing DOC facilities that are not on PCL&W

Work with the landowner and/or consult the relevant agreement. Follow the principles set out in this SOP to guide your approach. Seek advice from the legal team if required.

2.1.5 Closing unformed legal roads (paper roads)

Paper roads are not part of PCL, and the land cannot be closed by DOC, even if there is a DOC track running along the paper road.

Paper roads are vested in the local district council/unitary authority and the Council is the entity empowered to close it. The Council can implement short term closures or make bylaws that otherwise limit use of the road. DOC must request a closure from the council if it is required.

If the road is landlocked by PCL&W, DOC can effectively close access to the road by closing the surrounding PCL&W, thereby preventing access. However, DOC must not put any locked gates on the road. DOC can close a track that runs along a paper road but should not imply that the public cannot use the road.

Seek advice from the legal team about specific examples if required.

2.1.6 In all instances, close the minimum area possible

The area or track section closed should be as small as possible. It should be no larger than needed to exclude visitors from the particular hazard zone and reduce the risk to tolerable levels.

2.2 Managing risk to visitors through recommendations and facility closures/ booking cancellations

There are situations where a formal closure is not justified but where there are large numbers of low-skilled visitors who may not be equipped to manage the hazards present. In those situations, DOC may manage risk further by providing recommendations to visitors (such as to only visit during certain conditions, or only as part of a guided experience) or by closing facilities/ cancelling bookings. The area of PCL&W remains open, and it is not a closure of the track/area.

These approaches should be used sparingly, as visitors should be making their own decisions about their safety on PCL&W. It is only appropriate at sites with large numbers of lower-skilled/ inexperienced visitors, significant natural hazards, and a pattern of serious incidents and/ or near-misses.

2.2.1 Recommendations to visitors

Any recommendations should be phrased to make it clear that this is advice rather than a closure. For example: 'Walking Track X is not recommended today' or 'Walking Track Y is not recommended during heavy rain, as side streams flood the track' or 'Unless you have advanced mountaineering skills, we recommend that you only visit [location] as part of a guided trip'.

If setting up a daily recommendation system, scope the work carefully to ensure it can be resourced and maintained over time.

2.2.2 Facility closures/booking cancellations

This is a more intensive intervention than providing recommendations. It should only be used where a recommendation is viewed as insufficient to manage the risk to visitors, with serious injury/fatality a likely consequence if visitors continue to access the site.

At the discretion of the Operations Manager, establish a Trigger Action Response Plan (TARP) to close facilities (such as huts) and/or cancel bookings during particularly hazardous conditions. It is a closure of the facilities only and is not a closure of the track/wider area of conservation land. This is a very resource-intensive form of safety management and should only be used where absolutely necessary.

3. Processes for assessing and notifying closures

All closure decisions must be assessed following the process below. The criteria in section 2 of this SOP must be met to initiate this process. Any closures that are approved must be publicly notified according to the legal requirements set out below.

3.1 Process for assessing and implementing closures

3.1.1 Process for assessing and implementing potential closures

Use the following process for a temporary closure. (The criteria in 2.1.1 must be met).

Note: urgent situations are covered in section 3.3.

Identify the hazard and level of risk to the visitor:

1. Senior Heritage and Visitor Ranger writes up a recommendation using the [Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template](#) (doc-7370888). Checks the proposed closure would be consistent with the area's management plan and conservation management strategy.

If a closure is being recommended:

2. Operations Manager reviews the recommendation and approves the recommendation to close, by signing the Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template. To approve a closure under the Reserves Act, the Operations Manager must have been designated as a Commissioner – see [list of Commissioners](#) (doc-2750343). If the Operations Manager is not designated as a Commissioner, they pass the decision on to another Operations Manager or Director who is.
3. The Regional Director should be notified of the decision as soon as possible.
4. Publicly notify the closure (see section 3.2 for details).
5. Senior Heritage and Visitor Ranger leads the implementation of any other actions (e.g. temporary fencing of the site, visitor information updates etc).
6. Submit the completed Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template to the Visitor Safety Team by emailing it to visitorsafety@doc.govt.nz. The team undertake quality assurance and monitor the performance of this SOP.
7. Review the closure decision regularly (at an appropriate interval for the location and hazard being addressed) to ensure a closure is still required.

If there was sufficient concern about a hazard to undertake a closure assessment, then the decision to keep the track/facility/area open should also be reviewed and approved by the Operations Manager. If a closure is not recommended:

2. Operations Manager approves the recommendation not to close, by signing the Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template.
3. Senior Heritage and Visitor Ranger leads the implementation of any other actions (e.g., risk mitigations).
4. Review the decision if anything changes which may increase the risk.

If the hazard occurs over a weekend/holiday and the usual decision-makers aren't available, delegate to whoever is most appropriate in the circumstances, then have the decision reviewed, and if necessary confirmed, when the usual decision-makers have returned.

If the hazard is temporary and regularly occurring, prepare a Trigger Action Response Plan (TARP) that explains the proposed triggers for closure. This should then be approved through the process outlined above. Once the TARP has been approved, closures done under it do not need to go through the above approval process, although TARPs should be reviewed regularly and reapproved by the Operations Manager after review.

3.1.2 Process for disposing of tracks for visitor safety reasons

Use the following process to dispose of a track for visitor safety reasons. (The criteria in 2.1.2 must be met).

1. Follow the process for assessing and implementing potential closures (3.1.1 above). Apply a temporary closure if approved by the Operations Manager.
2. If it is identified that the closure needs to be permanent and results in the disposal of assets being required, refer to and follow DOC's process to decommission and dispose of an asset ([DOC.AM.DP.010 Decommission and Dispose of an Asset](#)).
3. Contact your Senior Visitor Advisor and Asset Specialist - Planning for support.
4. Maintain the closure while the disposal process is worked through.

Note: On site visitor information and closure signage should remain in place until the track is no longer useable and recognisable (e.g., replanted with locally sourced trees to obscure old track entrance, or so overgrown that it is not passable). Remove web information after two years or after the track is gone from maps and external websites, whichever is longer.

3.2 Notification requirements for closures

All notifications for closures should:

- State the reason for the closure.
- Provide a detailed description and/or a map of the closed area.
- Name the specific legislation under which the closure is made (see below).
- Follow the notification requirements for the land type (see below).

Consider whether visitors are likely to substitute to a nearby track/facility. If the nearby track/facility is only suitable for more experienced visitors, consider providing additional visitor information around this (e.g. strengthened/more comprehensive safety information), or promoting more appropriate alternatives.

See the table below for specific notification requirements.

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Land type / legislation that closure is made under	Recommended notification requirements for all land types	Specific legislative notification requirements in addition to recommended notification requirements
National Parks [section 51A, National Parks Act 1980]	The public should be notified of the closure by signage at-place (if possible), an alert on the DOC website and the booking system (if this impacts access to bookable sites).	Usually none, but strongly advisable to notify the public. Check the applicable National Park bylaws for any specific requirements.
Walkways [section 38(1)(a), Walking Access Act 2008]	Also inform iwi and stakeholders (e.g. Conservation Boards, local councils, regional tourism organisations, neighbouring landowners, concessionaires, Game Animal Council, community groups, local LandSAR group, local Police SAR contact) as appropriate.	Inform Herenga ā Nuku, post signage at all entrances and put a notice in the local newspaper. Notice must include name of walkway, period of closure, that it is an offence to enter during closure period, and the reason for the closure.
Government Purpose Reserve [Section 22(5) or section 60, Reserves Act 1977] Scientific Reserve [Section 21(2)(b) or section 59(2)(b), Reserves Act 1977]	Consider other ways to reach visitors (such as sharing on social media). If the closure will prevent the operation of a business and/or third-party facility on PCL&W, engage with them closely through the process, keeping them up to date on the situation, remediation plans and timeframes. Third party access may need to be preserved in some cases where they have access rights and limited alternative options.	Put a notice in the NZ Gazette for s22(5) or s21 closures. For s60 or s59(2)(b) closures none, but strongly advisable to notify the public.
Local Purpose Reserve [Section 23(4) or section 61(1), Reserves Act 1977]	If the closure will prevent the operation of a business and/or third-party facility on PCL&W, engage with them closely through the process, keeping them up to date on the situation, remediation plans and timeframes. Third party access may need to be preserved in some cases where they have access rights and limited alternative options.	Put a notice in the local newspaper (or the NZ Gazette if there is no local newspaper) for s23(4) closure. For s61(1) closure none, but strongly advisable to notify the public.
Recreation Reserve [section 53(1)(0) Reserves Act 1977] Scenic Reserve [section 55(1)(f) Reserves Act 1977] Historic Reserve [section 58(d) Reserves Act 1977]	If the closure will prevent the operation of a business and/or third-party facility on PCL&W, engage with them closely through the process, keeping them up to date on the situation, remediation plans and timeframes. Third party access may need to be preserved in some cases where they have access rights and limited alternative options.	None, but strongly advisable to notify the public
All conservation areas [section 13, Conservation Act 1987]		Put a notice in the local newspaper

3.3 Responding to urgent situations

Some risks may be so significant and urgent that there is a need to get warnings to the public before the closure assessment can be completed. In those instances, add an immediate website alert and sign covering the following points:

- There is a significant hazard present (name it)
- The site is being assessed for potential closure
- We strongly recommend that you do not access the site at present

Then proceed with the closure process as normal. Update the signage/web information once the assessment process has been done.

3.4 Assessing closures in situations where the extent of the damage and risk is unknown

In some circumstances it may not be possible to verify which hazards are present and what the level of risk is. For example, it may be too unsafe for staff to go to the site to assess it, or damage may be so widespread that it will take a long time to assess everywhere.

In those situations, rely on a **reasonable belief** about what the situation is likely to be, then assess based on that. Review decisions as soon as you have sufficient information to do so.

4. Process for reopening following a temporary closure

Temporary closures should be lifted once the risk to the visiting public is no longer present or has reduced to an acceptable level. Reopening decisions must be assessed following the process below.

4.1 Process for reopening

1. Assess whether the hazard that prompted the closure is still present, or whether the risk has reduced to an acceptable level for the predominant visitor group using the [visitor risk management \(at visitor sites on public conservation lands and waters\) SOP](#) (doc-7555122). Contact the Visitor Safety Team if you need support with the assessment by emailing visitorsafety@doc.govt.nz.
 - If on review you identify:
 - the hazard is no longer present, or
 - the risk from the hazard is re-assessed as acceptable for the predominant visitor group, or
 - the hazard has now been appropriately mitigated,then, the site can be reopened, as the level of visitor risk is acceptable.
 - If the hazard is still present and the risk has been assessed as still unacceptable, the site should remain closed.

- If it has been identified that the level of risk to visitors is now acceptable and the site can be reopened, the Senior Heritage and Visitor Ranger writes up a recommendation using the [Visitor Safety Reopening Assessment Template](#) (doc-7824993).

If reopening is being recommended:

2. Operations Manager approves the recommendation to reopen, by signing the Visitor Safety Reopening Assessment Template. The Regional Director should be notified of the decision as soon as possible.
3. Notify the relevant iwi or hapu group and engage with them on the reopening process as required.
4. Notify the relevant stakeholders of the reopening (this should include the stakeholders notified at the time of closure).
5. Publicly notify the reopening by updating the DOC website. If the initial closure of Scientific Reserves, Government Purpose Reserves and Local Purpose Reserves was published in the NZ Gazette, then reopening those reserves should also be published in the NZ Gazette.
6. Senior Heritage and Visitor Ranger leads the implementation of any other actions required for reopening (e.g. visitor information updates, track work, signage removal etc).
7. Submit the completed Visitor Safety Reopening Assessment Template to the Visitor Safety Team by emailing it to visitorsafety@doc.govt.nz. The team undertake quality assurance and monitor the performance of this SOP.

5. Related documents

- [Visitor Safety Closure Assessment Template](#) (doc-7370888)
- [Visitor Safety Reopening Assessment Template](#) (doc-7824993)
- [Visitor Risk Management \(at visitor sites on public conservation lands and waters\) SOP](#) (doc-7555122)
- [List of Reserve Commissioners](#) (doc-2750343)

6. Document history

Date	Details	Document ID and version	Amended by
29/02/2024	Changed the title and docCM number for the Visitor Risk Management SOP, as it has been updated.	DOC-7362830 Revision 15	Julia Wells

29/11/2024	<p>Added reopening process. Moved closure decision delegation from Director to Operations Manager level. Added connections to the visitor risk management SOP. Updated terms and definitions to align with the visitor risk management SOP. Edited wording to improve clarity. Removed decision making flow chart to improve clarity and simplify processes. Removed references to the closure review panel, as not used.</p> <p>Changes/additions reviewed and endorsed by DOC legal (Pene Williams – Senior Solicitor).</p>	DOC-7362830 Revision 16	Theo Chapman
29/11/2024	Updated 'last reviewed' date on the cover page.	DOC-7362830 Revision 17	Theo Chapman
04/12/2024	<p>Amended the track decommissioning process (now disposal process) to align and connect with DOC's process to decommission and dispose of an asset (DOC.AM.DP.010 Decommission and Dispose of an Asset).</p>	DOC-7362830 Revision 18	Theo Chapman (with input from Lynnell Greer and Frith Palenski)