



MEDIA RELEASE

15.04.26

Statement from Wairoa Mayor Craig Little

Much has been reported on my comment that, as a nation, I fear that we may be becoming woke. This has been misinterpreted and misreported as suggesting that Wairoa District Council took a cavalier approach to the recent weather event caused by Cyclone Vaianu, and that it did not care and failed to prepare for the forecasted weather event. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

The reality is that for the Wairoa District Council, the cyclone did not meet the criteria to be classified as an emergency as defined in the Civil Defence and Emergency Management Act. Since Cyclone Gabrielle, Wairoa District Council has put in an enormous amount of readiness work with our communities, including the development of localised resilience plans, the establishment of local “community champions” as an integral part of our Civil Defence response and the establishment of sound Civil Defence processes. The risks posed by Cyclone Vaianu were readily able to be dealt with by our well-prepared local Civil Defence team and emergency services and did not require a state of emergency response under the Civil Defence and Emergency Management Act.

For the Wairoa District Council, Cyclone Vaianu was, unfortunately, not our first rodeo. As with all significant weather events, we had been tracking Cyclone Vaianu for a week as it descended through the Pacific from the tropics, constantly monitoring the reports on its direction and force. By late last week, that work had been coordinated with the National and Regional Civil Defence Group Control through multi-agency meetings and information sharing.

However, the real work in the Civil Defence space starts with our communities and ensuring they are as prepared as possible for a range of potential hazards. The reviews of Hawke’s Bay Civil Defence undertaken by Mike Bush, and the National review of Civil Defence undertaken by Sir Jerry Mateparae following Cyclone Gabrielle, both identified the need for Civil Defence responses to be built from the community up, and that resilience needs to be developed in communities as a priority, rather than relying on Civil Defence being centralised in Napier and/or Hastings. This reflects the reality that when a really serious Civil Defence response is required, transportation and communication links outside Wairoa will likely be compromised. That is why we have been working on building resilience within our own communities.

☎ +64 6 838 7309

🌐 www.wairoadc.govt.nz

✉ communications@wairoadc.govt.nz

📮 PO Box 54, Wairoa 4160, Hawke’s Bay

🏠 Coronation Square, Queen Street, Wairoa



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I cannot, and do not purport to speak for any other Mayor in any other district. They need to make their calls as to whether to declare a state of emergency based on their own level of preparedness, their resources and the challenges facing their districts. What I can say is that, based on the information presented to us by HB Civil Defence and Emergency Management, there was no need to declare a state of emergency in Wairoa.

I stand by my comments that there is an overenthusiasm to reach for the tool of declaring a state of emergency. That is a special power that should be exercised only when necessary, in situations where the local Civil Defence and emergency services cannot deal with the situation. There is a danger that declaring a state of emergency when it is not absolutely necessary diverts resources such as emergency services, FENZ, St. John's, and NZ Defence Force from areas where those resources may actually be needed.

There is also the possibility that, by declaring states of emergency too readily, the force and importance of such a declaration is diminished. People become complacent when there is a constant tendency to cry wolf. It would be unfortunate if, by unnecessarily making a declaration, the force and importance of that power were lost. It is evident that an unnecessary state of emergency can cause panic and anxiety in the communities.

I am a firm believer that it is always better to err on the side of caution, and it is better to be safe than sorry. We absolutely need to be prepared to respond to challenges. However, we do not need to declare a state of emergency to be prepared, and if a situation worsens, a declaration can be made at any time. This was the point of my comment, which seems to have been misunderstood by some. In fact, it could be argued that by constantly reaching for the tool of making a declaration, we are moving further away from the need for our communities to be engaged and prepared for Civil Defence matters on an ongoing basis.

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