

21 May 2026

Ref: OIA 26083

Nigel Gray

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Tēnā koe Nigel

I refer to your request for official information received on 23 April 2026.

1. Basis for the EPA's use of the term "safe" in its public "About" page.
The EPA's "About / What we do" webpage states that the EPA's work is aimed at "enhancing a safe and sustainable way of life" for New Zealanders.

Please provide:

all internal documents, guidance, briefing notes, communication guidelines, or decision-making frameworks that define, explain, or justify the EPA's use of the term "safe" in this context;

any documents that set out the criteria, thresholds, or methodology the EPA relies on when describing its work as contributing to a "safe" way of life.

2. Consistency with the EPA's OIA response regarding the absence of a definition
In a previous OIA response, the EPA confirmed that it holds no definition, criteria, or internal guidance for the term "safe."

Please provide:

any internal discussions, emails, or documents that address how the EPA reconciles the use of the term "safe" in its public mission statement with the absence of any internal definition or criteria for that term; any documents that explain the intended meaning of "safe" as used in the "About / What we do" page.

3. If no such documents exist

If the EPA holds no documents that define, justify, or explain the use of the term "safe" in its public mission statement, please provide:

the EPA's actual description, explanation, or intended meaning of "safe" as used in that context; the EPA's reasons, under section 23 of the OIA, for using the term "safe" in public communications despite holding no definition or criteria for it.

Our response to your request is below.

As stated in our initial response of 22 April 2026 to you, and in answer to questions 1 and 2 of your current request, the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) does not hold any formal information or documentation relating to the word "safe". We are refusing this part of

your request under section 18(e) of the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA) as the documents alleged to contain the information requested do not exist.

The wording and explanations found on the EPA website and our other public communications describe the work we do. They provide information about our role as an environmental regulator and our key priorities. Our communications are in plain language so people can more easily understand our functions and the legislation we administer.

As the word “safe” is not defined in any of the legislation the EPA administers, the dictionary definition of the word is the most accurate way to describe it in the context of the EPA. The Oxford English Dictionary and Collins Dictionary definition includes “not exposed to danger; not liable to be harmed”.

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The EPA’s work in “enhancing a safe and sustainable way of life” refers to the risk management principles we apply when we make decisions or enforce regulations.

The EPA administers multiple pieces of legislation, which you can read about [here](#). We have provided more details below about the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act 1996 (HSNO Act) as an example of our role as an environmental regulator.

The EPA administers the HSNO Act alongside other agencies such as WorkSafe New Zealand. The HSNO Act is the main legislation that covers hazardous substances in New Zealand. Its purpose is to protect the environment, and the health and safety of people and communities by preventing or managing the adverse effects of hazardous substances and new organisms. In this context, “safe” means preventing or managing the adverse effects of hazardous substances.

In line with section [11\(c\)](#) of the HSNO Act, the EPA also has a role to “promote awareness of the adverse effects of hazardous substances and new organisms on people or the environment and awareness of the prevention or safe management of those effects”.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, hazardous substances need to be approved under the HSNO Act before they can be imported or manufactured.

The EPA assesses the risks, benefits, and risk management options of a substance before it can be approved. If its positive effects (the benefits) outweigh its adverse effects (the risks and costs) it can be approved. We make these decisions based on the evidence and information we have in front of us to consider the approval.

We do not describe substances approved under legislation as “safe”. We assess them and, if appropriate, approve them for use, with safety measures, or controls, applied to manage risks and to safeguard people and the environment.

You can read more about our role here on the EPA website:

<https://www.epa.govt.nz/hazardous-substances/how-we-manage-hazardous-substances/about-hazardous-substances-and-hsno/>

We consider that we have adequately responded to your queries on this matter. You have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman of this decision under section 28(3) of the OIA. You can contact the Ombudsman on 0800 802 602, or by email at info@ombudsman.parliament.nz.

We may publish your request and our response on our website, www.epa.govt.nz. We make OIA responses available so others can read more about the work we do and the questions we are asked. Any information that might identify you will be removed to protect your privacy.

Nāku noa nā



Catherine Spiller

Acting General Manager, Corporate Services