

Waipawa flood infrastructure upgrade project Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

June 2025

Cyclone Gabrielle made it plain: our flood defences, in places, were no longer enough. The Waipawa flood resilience upgrade – one of several across Hawke’s Bay – is part of a broader effort to reduce flood risk, help protect lives, and give our communities greater reassurance.

Here’s what you need to know about this project: what’s planned, what gravel extraction work we have underway, and how this local work connects to something much larger.

About the project

1. What are we proposing to do in Waipawa?

Funded by central government and Hawke’s Bay Regional Council (HBRC) under the North Island Weather Event (NIWE) flood mitigation programme, this project will upgrade the Waipawa stopbank network upgraded to the regional standard of 1-in-100-year protection – incorporating updated post-Gabrielle modelling and an additional 700mm of freeboard. The improved defences will offer greater security against future flooding – and give residents with more time to evacuate safely if another storm of the severity of Gabrielle was to strike.

We are in the early stages of preliminary design, but the work will likely include:

- Increasing the height and width of the stopbank that runs from Coronation Park to Rathbone Street, along the left bank of the Waipawa River.
- Ensuring the riverside ‘batter’ – or slope – of the stopbank meets current HBRC design standards.

2. Why is this project needed?

During Cyclone Gabrielle, floodwaters broke through the stopbank at Coronation Park, behind Stephenson’s and SH2. Elsewhere in lower Waipawa, the force of the water scoured out riverbanks and overtopped stopbanks along many streets – leaving parts of the town underwater, 60 houses heavily damaged, and communities cut off. The proposed works will significantly enhance flood resilience in Waipawa.

Timeline

3. When will the project start?

The first step? Early planning – and that’s already underway. From here, we move into the design phase, working through concept plans, then preliminary designs, and finally the detailed design itself over the next few months.

Throughout it all, we'll be keeping the community up to speed with regular newsletters, website updates and community meetings.

Design and impacts

4. What happens during the planning phase?

As we work through the design process, we will also undertake a range of site investigations (which will, in turn, help shape the final design). These will include geotechnical investigations, a Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA), along with consequential flooding and ecological impact reports.

5. What is the status of the Waipawa stopbank network? How much protection does it provide?

We're bringing the Waipawa stopbank up to HBRC design standards – which includes adding an additional freeboard requirement (Freeboard is an extra height allowance – a safety factor or buffer).

While the Waipawa stopbank height is sufficient to withstand a 1-in-100-year level event, new post-cyclone modelling shows it does not meet the freeboard requirements.

Gravel – and flood mitigation

6. What other flood mitigation work is happening around Waipawa?

HBRC has devoted considerable resources to gravel removal in recent years. Since 2021, 882,139 cubic metres has been extracted. We plan to extract a further 328,000 cubic metres in 2025.

7. How is gravel extracted – and what's a 'grade line'?

Gravel is extracted from rivers to help manage flood risk – and to do that safely and sustainably, we follow something called a *grade line*.

The grade line is a design benchmark: an average riverbed level that lets the river carry a typical annual flood without spilling over onto the surrounding berms. Gravel is only taken from above this line, helping protect the river's natural shape and flow. It's based on survey data – a snapshot in time – and because rivers are always changing, we keep monitoring and adjusting as needed.

Keeping extraction above the grade line helps to:

- Prevent erosion that could put roads, bridges and nearby infrastructure at risk.
- Maintain strong, stable riverbanks that support our flood protection work.
- Keep gravel moving naturally downstream, supporting both the extraction industry and coastal systems like the Lower Tukituki.
- Preserve the natural shape, flow and character of the river over time.

8. Can you use some of this gravel for the stopbank project?

Yes! We're looking to extract 30,000 cubic metres of gravel from the river in cross sections next to the township near Coronation Park, and two sites downstream of the rail bridge and SH2.

Mana whenua

9. How is HBRC working with mana whenua on these projects?

Our relationship with mana whenua is a cornerstone of this project. Partnership with mana whenua is crucial for ensuring the success and sustainability of infrastructure projects.

Our mana whenua engagement process is ongoing and ever evolving as we strive for meaningful collaboration, and to weave mātauranga Māori into our project planning and delivery.

More information

10. How do I keep up to date with the project?

We're committed to keeping you in the loop as the project progresses. Here's how you can stay connected:

- **Drop-in sessions and community meetings** – we'll hold these regularly, so you can ask questions, share thoughts, or just pop by for a chat.
- **Project hub** – you'll find a dedicated [Waipawa project webpage](#) on the HBRC website. This includes regular updates, timelines, and key documents.
- **Newsletters** – each month we'll send out a monthly newsletter. The first of these will go out at the end of June – you can subscribe via our website, or else email us and 'opt in'.
- **Email** – if you've got a question or concern – or want our newsletters – please get in touch at project.enquiries@hbrc.govt.nz.

The bigger picture: the NIWE programme

11. What is the North Island Weather Event (NIWE) resilience programme?

The NIWE programme is a multi-million-dollar Central Government investment in flood protection across the North Island. In Hawke's Bay, it funds eight major resilience projects – including Ōhiti Road | Ōmāhu, Pākōwhai, Pōrangahau, Waiohiki, Waipawa, Wairoa, Whirinaki and Havelock North.

Alongside these major builds, HBRC is also upgrading pump stations, stopbanks and river telemetry systems (which monitor and relay live river level and rainfall data).

12. Who's footing the bill?

Funding comes from both central and local government. Through its North Island Weather Event (NIWE) resilience programme, central government has committed \$200 million to flood protection

across Hawke's Bay, with HBRC contributing \$42 million – a combined programme budget of \$242 million. The funding is time-sensitive, so the work needs to be delivered quickly and within budget.

13. Why is this investment needed – and will it stop flooding completely?

Climate change and recent extreme weather have exposed the limits of our existing flood protection network. These projects strengthen our region's defences – and helps us adapt to a future where more storms are expected to be more frequent and intense. While no system can remove all risk, the upgrades will reduce the likelihood and severity of flooding – and give people more time to respond during an emergency.

14. What is a 100-year, 1% or 1-in-100-year flood?

A 1-in-100-year flood (also known as a 1% AEP or 100-year ARI event) refers to a flood that has a 1% chance of occurring in any given year. It doesn't mean it only happens once every hundred years – in fact, major floods can and do occur closer together.

The proposed Waipawa flood resilience network is designed to manage floods of this scale. In larger events, like Cyclone Gabrielle, it won't provide full protection but will still help slow floodwaters and give people more time to evacuate safely. Fully withstanding a Gabrielle-scale flood would require much more land and cost vastly more.

Got a question? Want the latest updates delivered straight to your inbox? Email us at project.enquiries@hbrc.govt.nz and we'll add you to our newsletter mailing list. You'll also find more detail – and the full story so far – on the [Waipawa project hub](#) at hbrc.govt.nz.