Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawbai

Cabinet Paper Talking Points: Access charging

To	Minister of Conservation		
Committee	Cabinet Economic Policy Committee		
Date of meeting	16 July 2025		
Reference	25-K-0017	**DocCM**	DOC-10358695
Minister lead	Minister of Conservation		
DOC Contact/s	Ruth Isaac, Deputy Director-General, Policy and Regulatory Services, s9(2)(a) s9(2)(a) James Johnson, Manager, Budget and Funding Policy, s9(2)(a)		
Security Level	In Confidence		

Purpose – Te aronga

1. This memo provides you with talking points to support the upcoming discussion on your Cabinet paper 'Charging for access to some public conservation land' at Cabinet Economic Policy Committee (**ECO**) on 16 July 2025.
2. The Cabinet paper seeks agreement to enable charging international visitors for access to some public conservation land (**PCL**).

Access charging proposals

3. The proposals seek to ensure access charges are:
    - set up as a new levy, with revenue ringfenced for conservation, to deliver improved visitor experiences and prioritise investment at the locations where charges are introduced;
    - enabled for international visitors, with New Zealanders (citizens and ordinary residents) exempt, with a commitment to revisit this decision after the first five years;
    - only introduced at sites with high international visitor numbers, or high infrastructure/facility costs for DOC, and where benefits of access charging exceed implementation costs; and
    - initially investigated and consulted on at four popular sites, which have the highest international visitor revenue potential – Milford Sound / Piopiotahi, Aoraki / Mount Cook, Cathedral Cove / Mautohe, and the Tongariro Alpine Crossing.

Background and context – Te horopaki

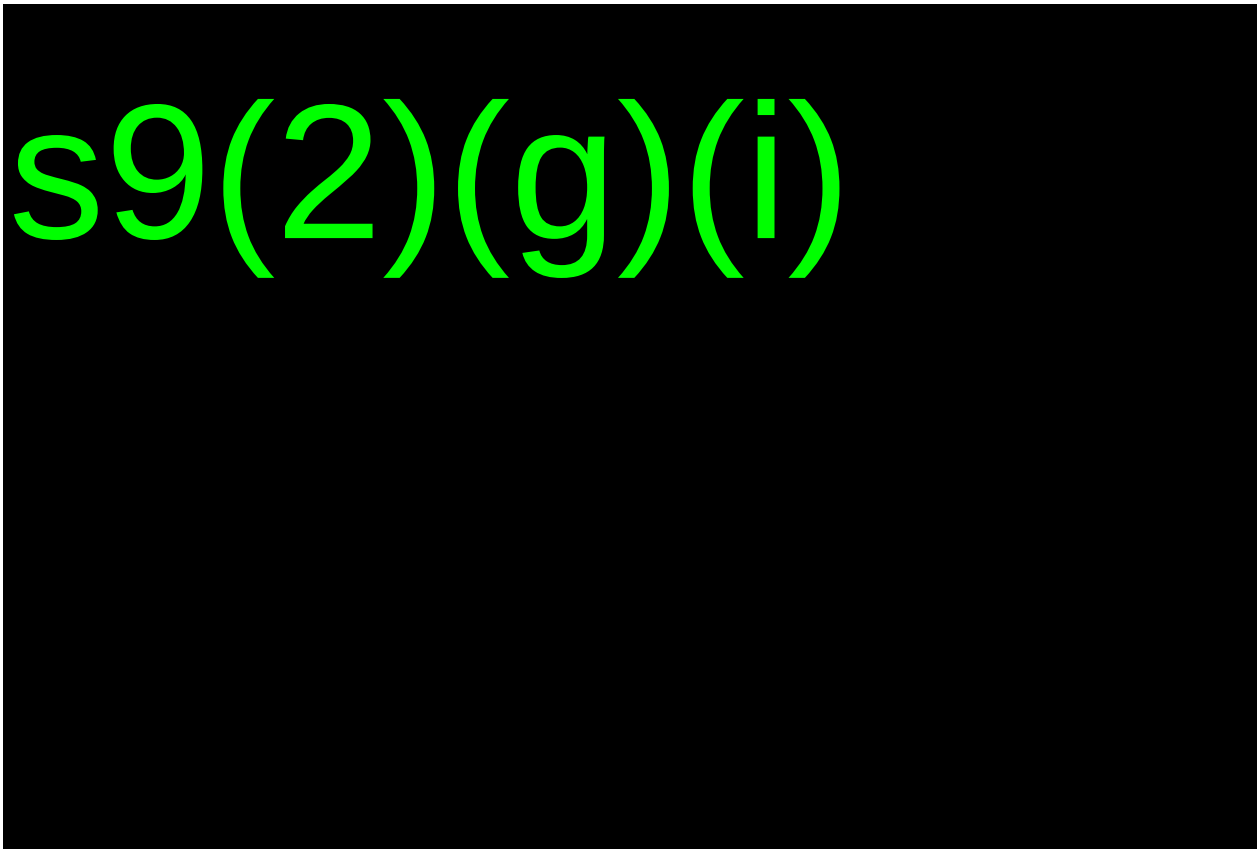
4. DOC already receives some funding from visitors through, for example, hut tickets and campsites, as well as the International Visitor Conservation and Tourism Levy (**IVL**). However, there are many international visitors accessing PCL for specific activities that do not attract a charge, such as short walks or day hikes. This is because conservation legislation does not enable us to charge for these activities.
5. Access charges are commonly used overseas in conservation areas with around 60 countries using them. Many international visitors expect to pay to visit these areas. This

proposal is about providing DOC with the legislative tools to enable access charging, consistent with other countries.

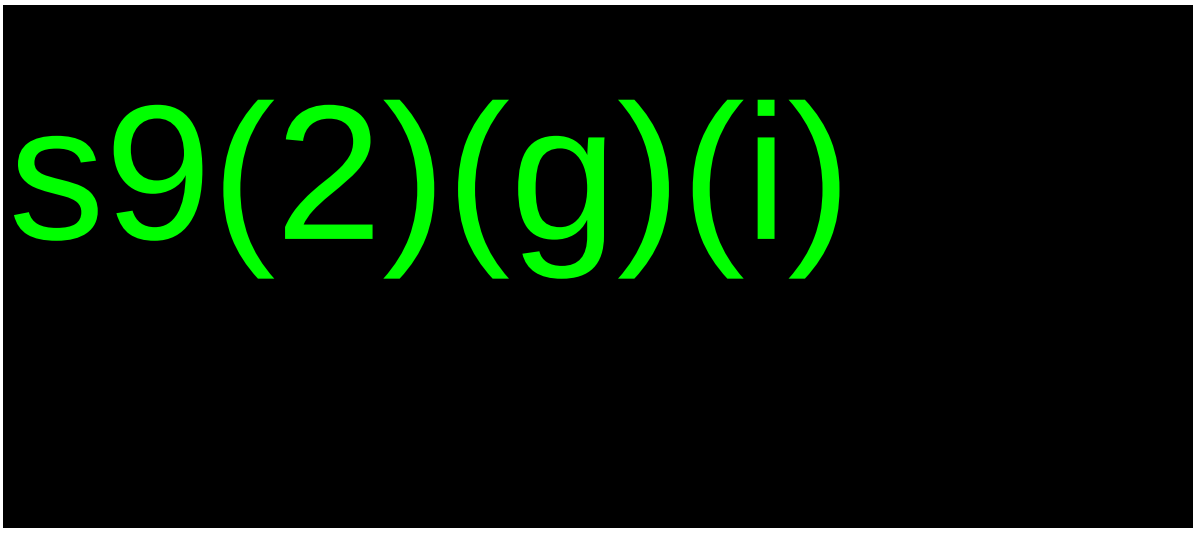
6. Cabinet previously agreed to your priorities for the conservation portfolio, including to 'Generate new revenue and recalibrate costs'. They also agreed to your Revenue Action Plan, which included an action to publicly consult on introducing access charges and then report back to Cabinet.
7. Public consultation occurred between November 2024 and February 2025, with over 7,400 submissions received. The majority of submitters, when asked who should pay, supported charging international visitors.

Ministerial consultation

8. The following feedback was received through Ministerial consultation on the Cabinet paper:



9. We made the following changes in response:



s9(2)(g)(i)

Next steps – Ngā tāwhaitanga

10. If Cabinet agrees to the recommendations in the Cabinet paper, officials will work with the Parliamentary Counsel Office (**PCO**) to draft legislation changes. These changes will be included in the Bill making wider changes on Modernising Conservation Land Management processes recently considered by Cabinet.
11. Access charging is on the agenda to discuss at the status meeting on Monday 14 July.

ENDS

Appendix 1: Talking points

Enabling access charging for international visitors

- I am proposing to amend conservation legislation to enable access charges for international visitors to some areas of public conservation land.
- Access charges are commonly used overseas in countries like Canada, Australia and the United States of America.
- I am proposing that access charges are implemented as a new levy, with revenue ringfenced for improving visitor experiences on public conservation land.

An access levy will support greater investment and tourism growth

- Conservation tourism is estimated to be worth $3.4 billion a year and growing.
- The Department of Conservation, and the visitor experiences it offers, play a critical role in supporting tourism and the Government's goal to build a stronger, more productive economy.
- Access charging will enable a step-change in investment needed to ensure we can maintain and enhance our world-class experiences, like Milford Sound / Piopiotahi, in the face of rising costs.
- Based on conservative estimates, an access levy for international visitors at four key sites could generate gross yearly revenue of $62 million. s9(2)(i) [redacted]

New Zealanders will be exempt from the levy

- Access charges should only be enabled for international visitors, with New Zealanders being exempt from paying.
- Public consultation showed that a majority of submitters, when asked who should pay an access charge, supported charging international visitors.

- Exempting New Zealanders from the levy ensures they can continue to freely access conservation areas and reduces risks relating to the Crown's obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi.

- The exemption results in a slightly lower estimated revenue (an estimated $5 million less revenue annually for the four proposed sites).

The access levy will only apply to some public conservation land

- An access levy will not be appropriate or effective across all public conservation land.

- I have outlined criteria for where we would introduce an access levy. The criteria include:

    - sites that are iconic and popular, with high international visitor numbers; or

    - sites that have high visitor infrastructure and facility costs; and

    - where the benefits of introducing an access levy exceed operational costs.

- Initially, I'm recommending we investigate an access levy at four sites: Aoraki / Mt Cook, Milford Sound / Piopiotahi, Cathedral Cove / Mautohe, and the Tongariro Alpine Crossing. I don't anticipate that we would have access charges at more than 10 sites in the future.

A Conservation Amendment Bill will be drafted this year

- Cabinet has already agreed to progress my wider changes to conservation legislation through the Modernising Conservation Land Management paper.

- Legislation changes required to enable an access levy will be included in the same Bill. This will be introduced before the end of the year.

- I will seek Cabinet decisions on secondary legislation for the access levy next year, as well as levy design settings, allocation of revenue,

and whether to proceed with introducing an access levy at the four popular locations proposed for investigation.

Appendix 2: Questions and Answers

Question 1: We already have the International Visitor Levy, why do we need access charges?	
Answer	The IVL is a broad charge paid by around 50 per cent of international visitors as part of the immigration process. It does not capture Australian visitors. It is designed to address some of the costs of international tourism, where visitors cannot be charged directly. It is spent on tourism and conservation priorities at a national level. The access levy will complement the IVL by enabling international visitors to contribute directly towards the management and improvement costs of the conservation assets they use. Access charges are common overseas, and research suggests that many international visitors expect to pay them for locations such as national parks.
Question 2: Why are you recommending that New Zealanders are exempt from access charges?	
Answer	New Zealanders have a strong connection to public conservation land and free access has been enshrined in legislation for decades. Public consultation revealed a strong desire to maintain this free access, especially from groups that regularly use public conservation land like hunters, recreation groups (e.g. trampers), and Iwi. Charging New Zealanders would likely receive significant public push back. It would also only raise an estimated additional $5 million in annual revenue, and could result in the Crown breaching its obligations under Section 4 of the Conservation Act, and Treaty of Waitangi obligations.

Question 3: How does this work overlap with the other conservation amendments you're proposing?	
Answer	The access charging and modernising conservation land management proposals were both consulted on between November 2024 and February 2025. Access charging is about improving the toolbox of options to generate revenue from visitors, and ensure people are paying fairly for the experiences they are having, like many countries overseas already do. Modernising conservation land management is about improving concessions processes, cutting processing times and costs, providing certainty for businesses, and enabling more flexibility on land exchanges and disposal where it makes sense from a conservation perspective. Both sets of policy will require legislative changes to be implemented. These will be made at the same time through one Conservation Amendment Bill. Together, they provide a complete package of changes to bring conservation legislation into the 21st Century.

Question 4: Where did the revenue estimates come from?	
Answer	The revenue estimates are based on a conservative access levy per international visitor of $40 at larger sites and $20 at smaller sites, multiplied by visitor numbers at the four proposed trial sites. These indicative charging rates came from looking at international examples of access charges, e.g. national park entry fees for China ($58), Nepal ($46), Argentina ($45), USA ($23) and Australia ($10). At these rates a levy would generate an estimated yearly revenue of $62 million. Further decisions will be taken to confirm final level amounts. Assumptions included: • 70% of visitors being willing to pay $100 to access larger experiences and $50 to access smaller experiences; • inelastic demand within the levy amount range given; • no induced demand from spending revenue; • non-compliance of 15% by visitors.
Question 5: How will the revenue from access charges be spent?	
Answer	The purpose of this levy will be to fund the maintenance and enhancement of visitor experiences on conservation land – this includes both improving visitor infrastructure, and enabling activities that will improve opportunities for wildlife encounters like habitat restoration and predator control. I will prioritise reinvesting levy revenue in the locations where it was generated. This is important for maintaining social license for the levy, distinguishing it from the IVL, and ensuring delivery of high-quality visitor experiences.

	I will report back to Cabinet on investment priorities for the access levy next year.
Question 6: What are some of the other ways that you are looking to increase revenue?	
Answer	I have developed a Revenue Action Plan to outline the different ways I intend to increase revenue from conservation. Some actions rely on improving returns from existing activities – such as reviewing hut and campsite pricing, or concessions pricing. There are also actions which will provide new revenue streams, such as enabling access charging, trialling carpark charges at some sites, exploring rent for access for mining arrangements, and contributing to the Government's work to support the developing nature credit market.
Question 7: What is the timeline for implementation?	
Answer	If Cabinet agrees to the recommendations, legislative changes to enable access charges will be incorporated into a wider Conservation Amendment Bill which is being drafted in the second half of this year. This Bill will be introduced and referred to Select Committee before the end of the year (it holds a category 5 priority in the 2025 legislative programme). Alongside the legislative process, s9(2)(h) [redacted] In addition, regulations will be developed which will outline key implementation details such as locations where the levy will apply and the rates payable. These regulations will be brought to Cabinet next year for consideration.

	Further planning is needed to provide an accurate estimate of when an access charge at these sites could be operating ‘on the ground’; Our initial estimates are for summer 2027.

Appendix 3: Copy of Recommendations

The Minister of Conservation recommends that the Committee:

1 **note** the Cabinet Economic Policy Committee invited the Minister of Conservation to report back in 2025, following public consultation, to seek final policy decisions for access charging and agreement to issue drafting instructions [ECO-24-MIN-0236];

2 **agree** to amend conservation legislation (Conservation Act 1987, National Parks Act 1980, and Reserves Act 1977) to enable the Department of Conservation to charge international visitors (non-citizens and those not ordinarily resident) for access to some public conservation land that is administered and managed by the Crown, by:

2.1 removing or amending any provisions that guarantee free public access to public conservation land;

2.2 removing any prohibitions on the Crown charging for tracks and paths;

3 **agree** to establish access charges as a new levy, with revenue ringfenced for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing the visitor experience on conservation land;

4 **agree** to revisit who is required to pay the levy in five years, based on the data and experience from international visitors, to determine whether New Zealanders should continue to be exempt, and consider any other required changes;

5 **agree** the following criteria are included in primary legislation as the basis for the Minister of Conservation proposing sites to introduce an access levy:

5.1 sites that are iconic and popular, with high international visitor numbers; or

5.2 sites with high visitor infrastructure and facility costs; and

5.3 the benefits of introducing the levy exceed the costs;

6 **agree** that an access levy will be investigated at the following initial four sites, and this investigation will include consultation with Iwi, local communities and concessionaires: Piopiotahi / Milford Sound, Aoraki / Mount Cook, Mautohe / Cathedral Cove and Tongariro Alpine Crossing**;**

7 **agree** the following levy-making and collection powers be included in primary legislation:

7.1 regulation-making powers to enable key aspects of levy implementation including: the levy payable by different visitor groups, locations where the levy will apply and the rates payable, and the collection of revenue by other parties (such as concessionaires) on behalf of the Director-General;

7.2 allowing the setting of exemptions and discounts for different types of visitor groups (with details set out in regulations);

7.3 requiring the Director-General of Conservation to collect (or authorise others to collect) the levy on behalf of the Crown;

7.4 requiring the Department of Conservation to undertake targeted engagement with Iwi, local communities and concessionaires on regulations to establish access charges at new locations and to make any major changes or updates to access charges once they are in place (with no consultation requirement for minor or technical changes, such as boundaries or CPI adjustments);

7.5 requiring the Minister of Conservation to review the levy and associated secondary legislation every five years;

7.6 requiring the Director-General of Conservation to report on revenue collection and expenditure every year;

7.7 allowing the Director-General of Conservation to waive (in total or part) payment of the levy by any groups or persons; and

7.8 giving the Department of Conservation the power to monitor the payment of the levy by visitors and enabling new enforcement options, including new infringement offences related to entering an area with an access levy without paying;

8 **invite** the Minister of Conservation to issue drafting instructions to Parliamentary Counsel Office for a Bill that amends conservation legislation as required to implement these recommendations;

9 s9(2)(h) [redacted]

10 **authorise** the Minister of Conservation to make decisions consistent with these recommendations on any minor or technical matters that may arise during the legislative drafting process;

11 **note** the Minister of Conservation will amend any relevant conservation general policy, (e.g. new National Conservation Policy Statement and area plans) to reflect the introduction of charges, once agreed, without the normal consultation requirements;

12 s9(2)(f)(iv) [redacted]

13 **note** the Minister of Conservation will consult with the Minister for Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations before confirming sites for the access levy;

14 **note** the Minister of Conservation will seek Cabinet decisions on secondary legislation for the access levy next year, as well as levy design settings, allocation of revenue, and whether to proceed with introducing an access levy at the four proposed locations.