Report on the Department of Conservation's Tahr Programme 2024/2025

Submitted to the New Zealand Conservation Authority in November 2025

One of many kea encountered during ground-based tahr control operations in the Landsborough Valley. Photo: DOC

Summary

2024/25 was the largest official control effort delivered by the Department of Conservation (DOC) since the current reporting approach started in 2020, eclipsing the record set in 2023/24. Official control prioritised preventing tahr expansion from the feral range, and reducing densities in national parks and wilderness areas. Aerial Assisted Trophy Hunting (AATH) 'environmental offsets' were directed into areas of higher tahr densities. This complementary application of control tools meant that despite much of DOC's work being outside the feral range, where operations typically control few tahr, this year resulted in the second largest DOC-led control total on record. In addition to DOC official control and AATH offsets, recreational hunters made substantial contributions to tahr control.

'Catch per unit effort' control data, paired with DOC and stakeholder observations, over a number of years suggest that in national parks and the Northern Exclusion Zone, tahr densities have reduced substantially. This is congruent with the tahr population survey undertaken in 2023, which suggests that it's likely that the overall tahr population reduced slightly between 2019 and 2023. In addition to overall numbers reducing, the reproductive capacity of the remaining herd has likely reduced, as most control inside the feral range (outside the national parks), targets female and juvenile animals.

Recent analysis of tussock height measurements found that where monitored tussock grasslands have been impacted by tahr, recovery was not evident at the last measurement despite substantial tahr control in preceding years. Analysis of a broader range of vegetation data collected at those sites is underway to understand whether there are other changes, or signs of recovery, occurring in these alpine tussock grasslands.

Context

The management of Himalayan tahr (tahr) on Public Conservation Land (PCL) is guided by the Himalayan Thar Management Policy (the Policy) 1991 and Himalayan Thar Control Plan (HTCP) 1993. The Policy outlines an approach to manage and maintain hunting and other control pressure at a level to protect natural values from tahr impacts. It sets a maximum population of 10,000 tahr across lands of all tenure throughout their defined feral range. The HTCP provides an operational vehicle for the Policy's objectives and limits; the primary construct for this is defining seven Management Units (MU), each with tahr population density limits, based on factors including location, vegetation, and recreational use. It also outlines expectations for monitoring tahr populations and vegetation condition to inform future tahr management, as well as the keeping of tahr for commercial and other purposes.

The HTCP 1993 is implemented through annual operational plans that identify management actions for each MU. As DOC's tahr management work is led as a national programme, one annual operational plan is prepared for the entirety of the programme, and a single annual report provided to the New Zealand Conservation Authority. Reports follow a standard format and present data in a consistent way, to help track and compare key information through time.

2024/2025 Operational Delivery

Delivery of the Tahr Control Operational Plan (TCOP) 2024/25

The TCOP 2024/25 was developed by the tahr programme in partnership with Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu and through engagement with members of the Tahr Plan Implementation Liaison Group (TPILG) and DOC's Regional Operations Group. Table 1 below outlines the number of tahr controlled over the full 2024/25 year within the management units and across each control type. This excludes most recreational hunting activity, for which robust data are not available; while unquantified, this contribution is considered to be substantial.

Table 1 - Number of tahr controlled (on PCL) within Management Units from known sources

Year 1 July – 30 June	DOC	AATH trophies	AATH 'environmental offsets'	Ballot hunters	Tahr Carcass Recovery	Organised recreational hunters	Other	Total
2018/19	168	264	0	619	400	63	244[1]	1758
2019/20	7238[1]	8	2936[2]	726	421	0	60[3]	11389
2020/21	7481[1]	17	0	889	0	0	60[3]	8447
2021/22	5750[1]	43	0	843	0	182	144[3]	6962
2022/23	5256[1]	342	415[4]	913	0	412	158[3]	7496
2023/24	3629[1]	309	2757[4]	850	0	330	163[3]	7847
2024/25	4641[1]	285	2704[4]	685	0	437	43[3]	8599

[1] Includes contracted control; [2] Includes control not undertaken in 2018/19; [3] Zero Invasive Predators programme; [4] includes offsets conducted inside the feral range but outside management units, but reported here for consistency to show the total number of AATH offsets undertaken (in previous years all were within the MUs).

Under the 2024/25 TCOP, the equivalent of 352 hours of official aerial tahr control were delivered. Control was delivered through a combination of DOC staff and contracted aerial control and DOC staff and contracted ground-based control. The undertaking of Aerial Assisted Trophy Hunting (AATH) offset control was also directed (led) by the Department; under the conditions of their permits, AATH operators are required to control 5 female/juvenile tahr for each wild animal trophy they take on public conservation land. The resulting number of tahr removed in each Management Unit, inside the feral range but outside the management units, and outside the feral range are detailed in the 2024/25 row of Table 2 below. Maps outlining the locations of DOC's official control operations inside the feral range in 2024/25 are available on DOC's "Himalayan tahr sightings and control maps"[1] page.

[1] http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/things-to-do/hunting/what-to-hunt/tahr/tahr-control-operations/tahr-sightings-maps/

Table 2 - Tahr removed by Department-led Control

Year 1 July – 30 June	MU 1	MU 2	MU 3	MU 4	MU 5	MU 6	MU 7	Inside Feral Range, Outside Management Units	Outside Feral Range	Total
2018/19	168	0	0	0	0	0	0	NA	387	555
2019/20	2113	246	1603	3675	1278	1332	58	NA	517	10822
2020/21	555	1038	641	3299	241	1697	10	NA	265	7746
2021/22	0	873	187	3007	111	1572	0	196	449	6395
2022/23	406	832	334	2706	116	1277	0	322	390	6383
2023/24	285	866	617	3330	459	568	34	395[1]	527	7081
2024/25	256	873	584	1931	953	2147	153	703[1]	295	7895

List of Management Units: MU 1 Rakaia / Rangitata; MU 2 South Whitcombe / Whataroa; MU 3 Gammack / Two Thumb; MU 4 Westland Tai Poutini NP/ Aoraki Mt Cook NP; MU 5 Ben Ohau; MU 6 Landsborough; MU 7 Hunter / Wills. Outside Feral Range is inclusive of tahr removed in the Northern and Southern Exclusion Zones.
Note: The tahr reported across management units in Table 2 are control totals from DOC-led control made up of a mixture of contracted control, AATH environmental offsets and DOC-delivered control. Not recorded on this table are tahr removed by AATH trophy concessions, tahr carcass recovery, Zero Invasive Predators programmes, or recreational hunting (see Table 1).
[1]Includes Tahr controlled as AATH offsets did not have sufficient data to assign their location, so they are captured within the 'inside feral range' total.

Comparison with prior years

The operational effort delivered in 2024/25 (352 hours) was greater than planned under the TCOP (290 hours); this was largely due to the redeployment of funds budgeted for monitoring initiatives that were delayed. The 352 hours was the largest control effort delivered since the current recording approach (using hours of aerial effort) commenced (See Table 3).

Table 3 – DOC official control operational effort (2020 to 2025)

Year 1 July – 30 June	Operational Effort Inside the Feral Range (hours*)	Operational Effort Outside the Feral Range (hours*)	Overall Operational Effort (hours*)	Component delivered through ground-based control (hrs / %)
2020/21	239	71	310	0 / 0
2021/22	188	95	283	11 / 4
2022/23	173	139	312	15 / 5
2023/24	139	196	335	44 / 13
2024/25	183	169	352	125 / 36

* Since 2020, DOC's official control effort has been measured in hours of aerial control, or equivalent control delivered by other methods.

The total number of tahr removed by DOC-led control was the second highest recorded, behind 2019/20 when the current (nationally-led) tahr programme started (Tables 1 and 2). DOC's official control numbers were lower than most previous years; however, additional effort in directing a large number of AATH offsets and facilitating coordinated recreational hunting opportunities led to the overall increase in the control total from known sources.

The lower DOC official control numbers in 2024/25 and 2023/24 compared to earlier seasons can primarily be attributed to:

- Changes in operational focus between years, primarily an increase in the proportion of DOC's work that focuses on low tahr density areas outside the feral range; and
- A continued DOC official control focus in national parks and wilderness areas where evidence suggests densities are decreasing.

Implementation of ground-based control

In response to observations of tahr utilising forest and sub-alpine scrub habitats on the West Coast, which may reduce the effectiveness of traditional aerial control, DOC has increased ground-based control in recent years.

Following initial trials in 2021/22 and 2022/23 the proportion of control delivered through ground-based hunting has increased substantially, from 0% in 2020/21 to 36% in 2024/25 (Table 3).

Repeat operations in the Adams River, within the Adams Wilderness Area, have yielded useful information regarding the effectiveness of ground-based control in reducing tahr numbers within small geographical areas (catchment, or sub-catchment). The 2023 and 2024 operations encountered high densities of tahr and delivered control that was more cost efficient that recent aerial control operations in the area. However, in 2025, after 988 tahr were removed from the catchment by preceding operations, hunters encountered, and consequently controlled, fewer tahr (see Table 4). Hunting tactics were adapted to achieve control to low levels, compared with the initial population 'knock-down' of previous years. These results highlight the versatility of ground-based control in adapting to wild animal population changes and control requirements, and the ability to concentrate effort in small areas of the landscape.

Figure 1 – three years of control waypoints from the Adams River catchment, demonstrating the intensity of control effort within a small area that ground-based control can provide.

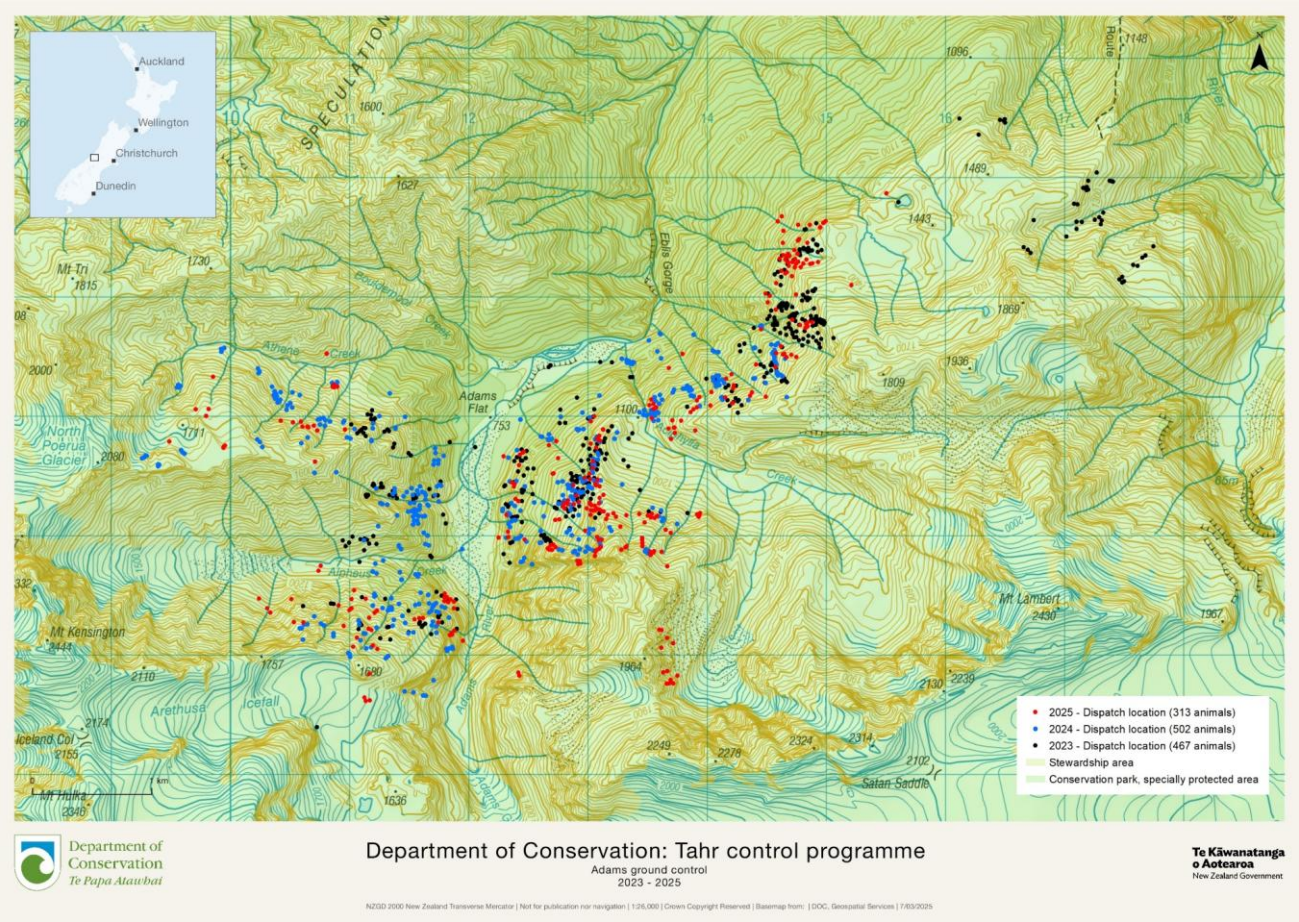


Table 4 – Ground-based control in the Adams River (2023 to 2025)

Year	Hunter Days	Tahr Controlled (female and juvenile)	Tahr per Hunter Day	Tahr Per Hour required for aerial control to deliver cost-equivalent control
2023	20	486	24	81
2024	36	502	14	41
2025	40	315	8	19

An unanticipated benefit of the 2025 Adams Flat ground-based operation was the discovery of a kiwi pukupuku/little spotted kiwi (*Apteryx owenii*) by one of the hunters.

In addition to the 315 tahr controlled in the Adams River through DOC's ground-based control, 1,232 were controlled in the Landsborough River valley and 403 in Makaawhio/Jacobs River valley.

In an operational environment where helicopter costs have substantially increased in recent years, and where tahr have shelter from helicopters (e.g. West Coast scrub), the implementation of ground-based control is an effective supplement to aerial hunting. In some areas it may be a more effective and efficient primary control method, with the potential to follow through to control to low levels; data from operations will continue to be evaluated to inform how future operational investment is best directed between methods.

Tahr control outside the feral range, and inside the feral range but outside management units

Control of tahr numbers outside the feral range defined by the HTCP is an important component of preventing range expansion and the establishment of new populations. Based on an external review of outside feral range operations in 2021, the programme increased control effort outside the feral range. A particular focus is reducing the risk of expansion to the north or south of the feral range along the Southern Alps, where mountainous terrain would suit tahr and a number of National Parks are located (Arthur's Pass, Mt Aspiring, Fiordland).

During 169 hours of aerial control effort, a total of 295 tahr were controlled outside the feral range during 2024/25. This contrasts with 527 tahr controlled outside the feral range in 2023/24 (196 hours), 390 in 2022/23 (139 hours). Broadly speaking, the increase in effort required to control tahr in these areas is considered a positive development; often increasing control effort required per animal is an indication of a lower population of animals. However, the variety and breadth of operations outside the feral range also mean there are substantial operational changes from year to year which may also impact the data in ways unrelated to tahr abundance.

The areas with the most consistent investment and control approaches through time are the Northern Exclusion Zone (NEZ) and Southern Exclusion Zone (SEZ). The NEZ is one of the areas where a decision was made in 2021/22 to substantially increase investment. The results in Table 3 suggest that with concerted effort in the NEZ, based on available data, tahr densities have likely reduced.

Table 5 - Summary of aerial control effort and number of tahr controlled in the Northern Exclusion Zone from 2020/21 to 2024/25.

Tahr Control Operational Plan	Hours of aerial control in the NEZ	Number of tahr controlled	Catch per unit effort (tahr per hour)
2020/21	6.3	49	7.8
2021/22	24.9	210	8.4
2022/23	39.4	143	3.6
2023/24	63.1	174	2.8
2024/25	55.0	61	1.1

Appendix 1 provides a map with details on the number of tahr controlled in specific areas outside the feral range over this time period.

In 2021/22 the TCOP included the tahr programme's first allocation of aerial control to specifically target tahr inside the feral range but outside the management units. These operations were aimed at reducing the potential for movement of tahr to outside the feral range.

Subsequent TCOPs have continued this approach, focusing on the southern and north-western areas inside the feral range where there are considered to be elevated risks of tahr moving outside the feral range. On the West Coast, inside feral range control has also been used to provide operational flexibility for control operations working within Westland Tai Poutini National Park, to target tahr close to but outside the Management Unit, improving efficiency operating at a landscape scale. AATH offsets also contribute to control inside the feral range but outside the management units where there are pockets of higher tahr densities (primarily adjacent to Management Unit 6 (Landsborough)).

Appendix 2 provides a map with details on the number of tahr controlled during DOC official control operations in specific areas inside the feral range but outside the management units during 2024/25 operations.

Relationships and Engagement

Relationship with Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu

During 2024/25, DOC and Ngāi Tahu continued their commitment to developing the Treaty partnership in relation to tahr management.

Tahr Plan Implementation Liaison Group

The TPILG liaises with DOC, presenting the views of various stakeholders and entities with interests in tahr management. Membership includes representatives from Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, statutory boards and authorities (including the New Zealand Conservation Authority), the recreational and commercial hunting sector, farming bodies, outdoor recreation groups and Forest & Bird.

A total of three TPILG meetings were held during 2024/25. The first was an update on progress under TCOP 2024/25, and summary of 2023/24, on the 27th of August 2024. The December 2024 (6th) and March 2025 (7th) TPILG meetings were centred around the development and review of the 2025/26 TCOP; that engagement also included two rounds of written submissions. At the December 2024 meeting, members were provided with contextual material to consider to inform written submissions to the Department prior to drafting of the TCOP; this included a presentation on, and discussion of, tussock grassland monitoring results. A timeline for TCOP development and feedback was also outlined; those submissions were due by 27 January 2024 (4 submissions were received). The draft plan was then circulated to the TPILG on 21 February to facilitate feedback on the draft at the March 2025 meeting. Members had until 4 April to provide additional written feedback on the draft after the meeting (2 submissions were received). Feedback from these meetings and written submissions helped to refine the 2025/26 plan, with the final TCOP 2025/26 being released on 10 June 2025.

Game Animal Council control mid-point meeting

Continuing the operating and consultation rhythm established in 2020, DOC met with representatives of the Game Animal Council on 14 August 2024 to discuss operational details of the first half of official tahr control effort for 2024/25. DOC considered the Council's advice in determining the operational detail of work for the remaining control effort.

Recreational Hunters

DOC encourages hunters to shoot tahr. In 2024/25 DOC continued to work with the recreational hunting sector to provide information on both control activity and observations of tahr. This included:
- continued posting maps of control effort and the locations of observed identifiable males to DOC's website[2], and
- tahr content updates within DOC's wild animal management newsletters 13 September 2024 and 8 April 2025.

The West Coast tahr ballots are a valuable recreational contribution to tahr control, focused in the Hooker/Landsborough and Adams wilderness areas. Since 2019, an average of almost 800 tahr per year have been controlled during the ballots (See table 1). In 2024/25 DOC, along with the New Zealand Tahr Foundation, supported the Game Animal Council's development of a tahr ballot education module within their 'Better Hunting' online education resource. The module highlights the ballot's role for conservation and how hunters can maximise it, as well as providing information on how to camp safely and responsibly in the wilderness areas, particularly regarding kea interactions. The module was rolled out to successful 2025 ballot holders as a trial, and following positive feedback has since been made generally available online.

[2] http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/things-to-do/hunting/what-to-hunt/tahr/tahr-control-operations/tahr-sightings-maps/

Figure 2 – DOC staff undertaking an inspection of the Eblis Tops ballot landing site, in the Adams Wilderness Area.

In 2024/25 DOC again worked with the New Zealand Tahr Foundation to facilitate the Foundation's delivery of organised recreational hunts in MU6 (Landsborough) and, for the first time, in MU4a (Westland Tai Poutini National Park). The Foundation conducted repeat operations in the Jacobs/Makaawhio River and Mahitahi River valleys, as well as operating at new locations in the Clarke, Paringa, Otoko and Troyte River catchments. The operations removed 437 mainly mature females from those areas, focusing on forest and scrub habitat where aerial control is less effective than in the alpine environment. Since 2022 almost 1,400 tahr have been controlled through this initiative (see Table 1, 'Organised recreational hunters').

Aerial Assisted Trophy Hunting

AATH is a high value tourism activity undertaken in New Zealand, using a helicopter to locate, hunt and retrieve a trophy animal for a hunter. Under AATH permits for PCL, operators are required to undertake environmental offsets; for each trophy they must control 5 female/juvenile wild animals. These offsets are administered through DOC's tahr programme.

AATH trophy numbers peaked in 2022/2023 (593 trophies) due to a back-log of demand after COVID-19 border closures. Since then, trophy numbers have gradually reduced. In 2023/24 309 tahr trophies were taken, from a total of 525 wild animal trophies; those trophies generated 2,625 environmental offsets and 2,704[3] offsets were subsequently undertaken in 2024/25.

The 2023/24 TCOP specifically included AATH offsets within DOC's control delivery for the first time, based on forecast trophy/offset numbers provided by the New Zealand Professional Hunting Guides Association after a survey of their members. This approach was beneficial in distributing control effort across the landscape, targeting AATH offsets to areas with higher tahr numbers, meaning DOC official control could focus on lower-output work where control to zero, or low, density is required. Based on that positive trial, AATH offsets continue to be integrated in TCOPs.

[3] includes a number of offsets 'carried over' from the previous year.

Monitoring Updates

Continuing work in line with the 2020/21 research and monitoring strategy, the following lines of research and monitoring have been implemented:

Estate condition trend

Ongoing monitoring of estate condition in the tahr feral range occurs through the national monitoring system (Tier 1), along with additional longer-term monitoring of tussock grassland plots. Historic monitoring reports are available on DOC's 'tahr and conservation[4]' web page.

In the 2024/25 year, analysis of tussock-height data collected from variable-area tussock grassland plots at 8 long-term alpine monitoring sites was completed; the most recent measurements at these sites were completed between 2021 and 2023. The report was provided to the Authority in early 2025/26 after a peer review process; it documents a link between increased ungulate (primarily tahr) activity and decreasing tussock height. Tahr activity increased from 1990-2023 across most of the sites monitored, and tussock height decreases were similarly observed in most locations.

Given the coarse temporal scale of this monitoring (up to 10 years between remeasurements) and the slow response of mature tussocks to changes in their environment, these tussock height data may not reflect changes in vegetation condition in response to increased tahr control since 2019. Analysis of other data collected at those sites is underway and a report is anticipated in 2025/26, which will provide a more detailed picture of other vegetation changes at those plots. Re-measurement of tussock grassland sites is also due to commence in 2025/26; this will be a 5 year rotation since the last measurements, covering a period of sustained, substantial tahr control at many of the sites.

In 2021/22, drawing on a number of the themes identified in the research and monitoring strategy (outlined above), work began to develop and trial a 'rapid impact assessment method' for tahr browse, incorporating a broader suite of sites and species than the existing tussock plots. A substantial field pilot was run in 2023. The resulting data have been analysed by Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research and it is anticipated a technical report will be available in 2025/26.

Figure 3 – Recording data during 'rapid impact assessment method' field trial.

[4] https://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/things-to-do/hunting/what-to-hunt/tahr/tahr-and-conservation/

Understanding tahr populations

As previously reported to the Authority, a series of tahr population estimates have been generated in recent years based on aerial surveys conducted by DOC. The relevant reports, and a plain language summary are available on DOC's 'Tahr and Conservation'[5] web page:

- Estimates of Himalayan Tahr (Hemitragus jemlahicus) Abundance in New Zealand: Results from Aerial Surveys[6] (2016-2019),
- Abundance of Himalayan tahr in the South Rakaia/Upper Rangitata and Gammack/Two thumb Management Units[7] (2021)
- Abundance of Himalayan Tahr on Public Conservation Land in New Zealand[8] (2023),
- Monitoring Himalayan Tahr populations in New Zealand[9].

Surveying tahr within the mountainous terrain they inhabit is resource intensive. The surveys follow a robust process and the estimates provided by the survey method are of similar precision to comparable wildlife estimates internationally; nonetheless the estimate ranges are broad, due to the inherent natural complexity and variability surveying wildlife populations. Consequently, it would be costly and of limited benefit to survey frequently; no additional surveys were undertaken in 2024/25.

Since the 2023 tahr population estimate (22,100 to 40,150 (a mean of 29,800) tahr on PCL within the management units), over 20,000 tahr are known to have been removed from PCL, plus many more by recreational hunters. It is considered likely that this level of control has continued to reduce the tahr population on PCL. This is considered a positive situation, particularly considering:

a) the substantial control effort that has gone into national parks and areas outside the Feral Range (focused on outcomes at place, rather than overall population reduction), and

b) that control within the feral range (outside the national parks) has focused on female and juvenile tahr, which should reduce the reproductive capacity of the remaining tahr herd.

DOC is considering options to further improve understanding tahr populations, including exploring the potential to incorporate demographic population modelling as a resource-efficient means of augmenting current information generated by periodic population surveys.

[5] https://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/things-to-do/hunting/what-to-hunt/tahr/tahr-and-conservation/
[6] https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/parks-and-recreation/hunting/west-coast/himalayan-tahr-abundance-september-2019.pdf
[7] https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/parks-and-recreation/hunting/tahr/tahr-estimates-2021-south-rakaia-upper-rangitata-gammack-two-thumb.pdf
[8] https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/parks-and-recreation/hunting/tahr/tahr-abundance-public-conservation-land-2023-aerial-survey.pdf
[9] https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/parks-and-recreation/hunting/tahr/himalayan-tahr-population-monitoring-2024-factsheet.pdf

Outlook and Plans for Next Year (2025/26)

TPILG discussions

In December 2025 engagement on the 2026/27 TCOP will commence and is expected to again span 4-5 months, including 2 meetings (December 2025 and March 2026) and two opportunities for written submissions.

Population estimates and vegetation monitoring

The analysis and reporting of two lines of vegetation monitoring data (additional data from variable area tussock plots, and the tahr browse impact method pilot) will be completed, and will provide important context regarding vegetation condition and tahr management. Remeasurement of variable area tussock plots will commence, five years since their previous measurement; the work will be completed over three summer field seasons.

AATH offsets and permitting

The AATH system is closely linked to tahr management, as tahr are the primary target for AATH and 'environmental offsets' generated by AATH are utilised for tahr control.

The 2024/25 AATH reporting season has recently concluded at the time of writing (the season spans February to August); subject to final confirmation of concessions returns, 285 bull tahr trophies were reported taken from PCL, out of a total of 453 wild animals. This equates to 2,265 offsets to be directed via the 2025/26 TCOP. At the time of writing, the bulk of those offsets are complete.

AATH operators were issued with new permits in late 2024/25, which cover the activity to the end of the next season (August 2026).

Recreational Hunters

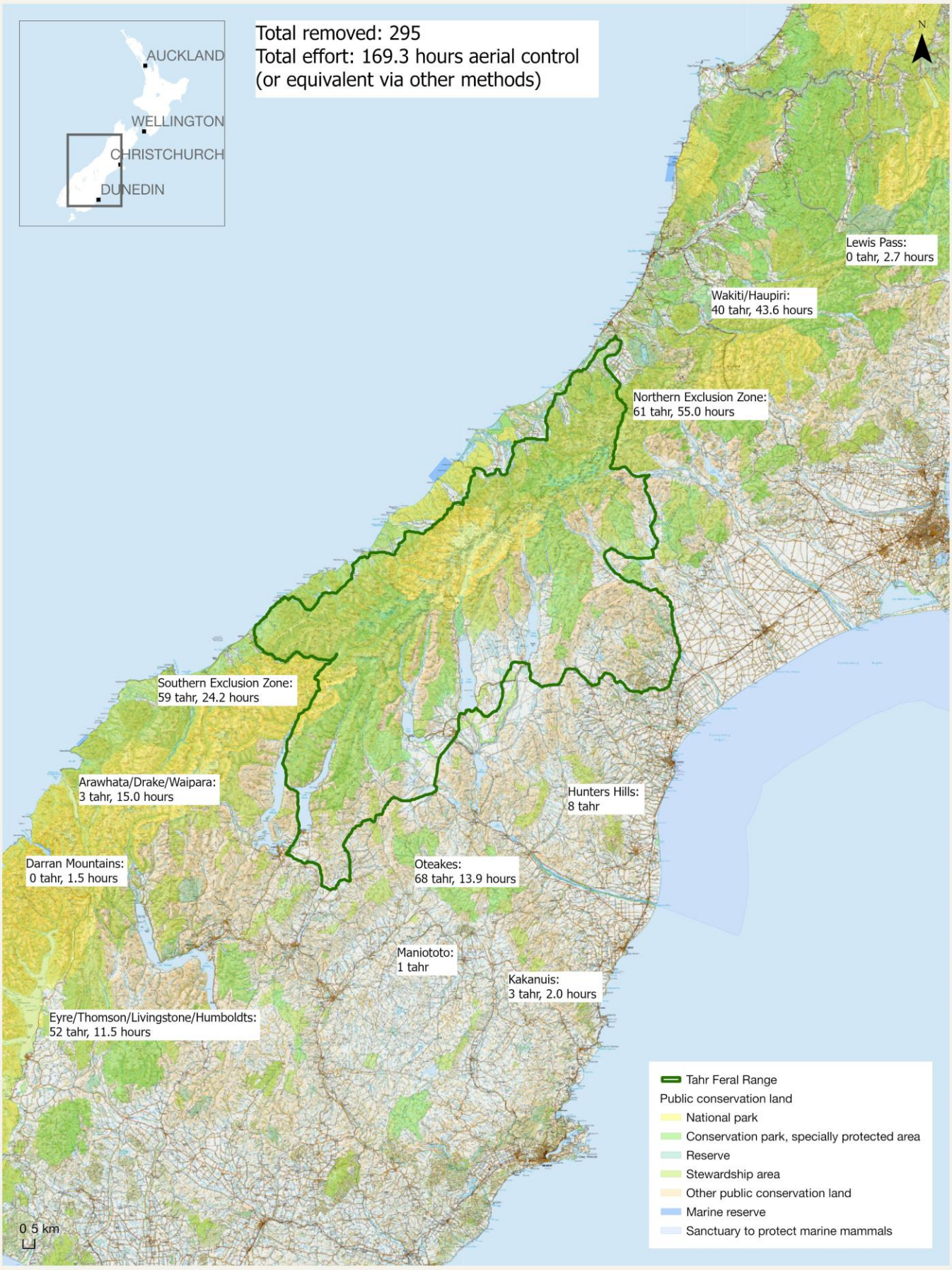
The 2025 ballot was the second run in a revised format with a shorter period of 9 weeks, but with additional landing sites. A number of 'alternate sites' in Westland Tai Poutini National Park were used in 2025 due to a predator control operation that affected established sites within the Adams Wilderness Area. The 2026 ballot is anticipated to return to a more established set of sites, but follow the same overall format.

The New Zealand Tahr Foundation's Community Agreement with DOC in South Westland will continue, with control operations planned in a number of catchments within management units 4a (Westland Tai Poutini National Park) and 6 (Landsborough).

Financial Summary (1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025)

Control operational delivery costs for the 2024/25 financial year were approximately $1,100,000.

Appendix 1. Department of Conservation tahr control outside the feral range 2024/25



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Department of Conservation - Tahr Programme
Outside feral range
1st July 2024 to 30th June 2025

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

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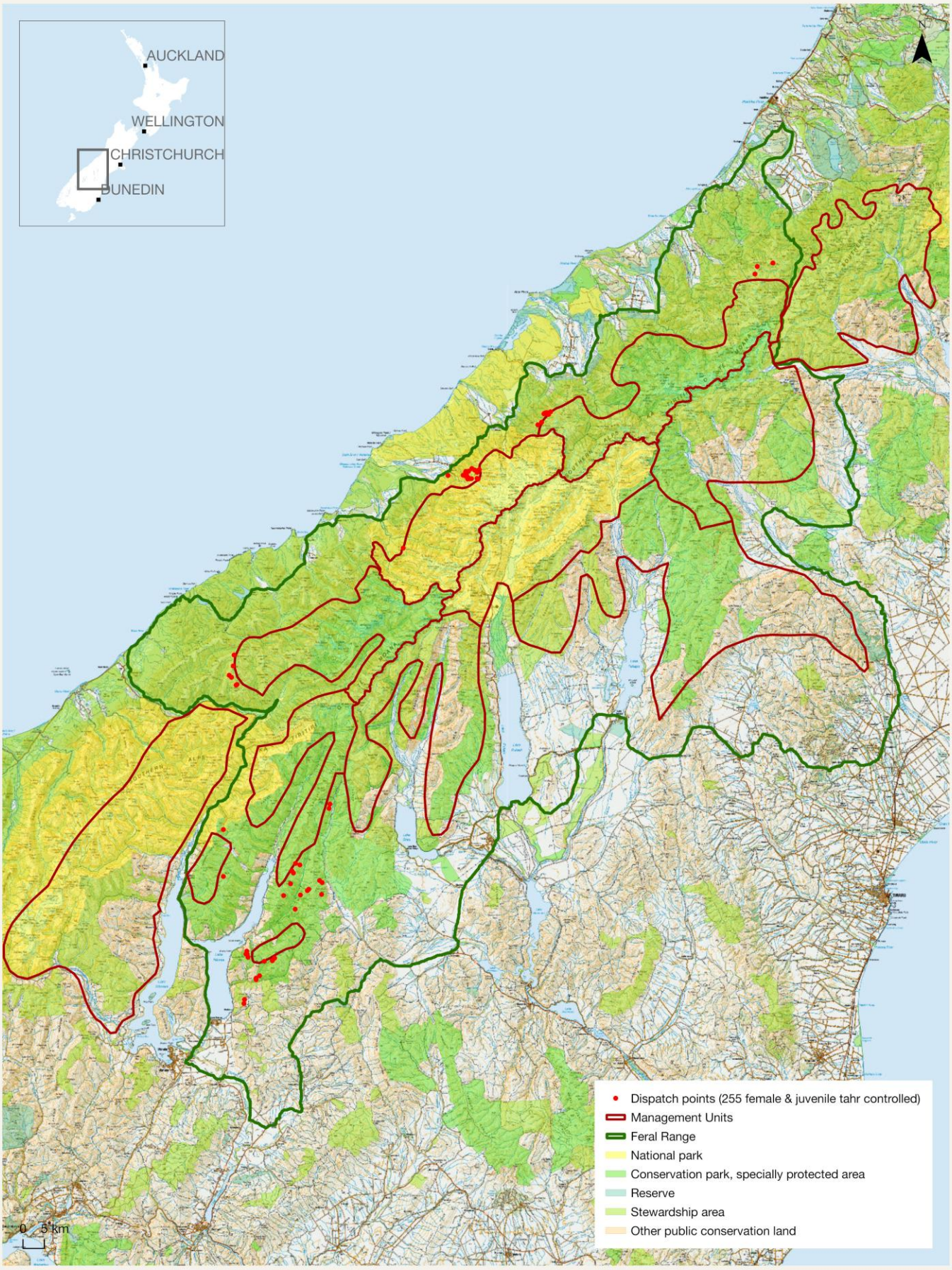
Appendix 2. Department of Conservation tahr control inside the feral range but outside the MUs 2024/25



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Department of Conservation - Tahr Programme
Inside feral range outside management units
July - November 2024

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

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