

POTHOLES

Communication & Engagement Plan

The 2022 winter period has seen significant media and public interest in the condition of the state highway network, particularly the continued presence of potholes.

There is a perception, especially on social media, that Waka Kotahi and its contractors are not doing enough to maintain the state highway network appropriately.

This plan outlines our approach to this specific issue, drawing on wider road maintenance engagement themes, and considers the full road maintenance system in its approach.

While this plan focuses on the very visible issue of potholes, it sits within the wider maintenance communications strategy as a subset. It will align messaging and channels to ensure the overarching Waka Kotahi narrative is consistent and compelling.

Background - the pothole issue

There have been a number of extreme wet weather events this winter which have contributed to road damage across the network.

Moisture in our pavements is a key contributor to potholes. As our roads surfaces and pavements get older they are more susceptible to allowing moisture in. Recent high and intense rainfall has contributed to a significant increase in the number of potholes present across the country.

The age of seal and pavement is directly related to the levels of investment for renewal works, and funding restrictions over the last decade has limited the level of renewal work Waka Kotahi has been able to undertake.

It is not uncommon to see potholes filled multiple times during a single winter, creating frustration for road users who feel their taxpayer dollars are being 'wasted' on temporary repairs.

The North Island is significantly more affected, with over 70% of all potholes (based on 2021/22 financial year data). Internally, three networks are considered most affected: Northland, Central Waikato and Taranaki, however, Tairāwhiti and BOP East also have a significant number of potholes per lane kilometre. However, in the public eye there is no such thing as a 'good' pothole.

The recent event on SH29 (Kaimai Range) is a perfect example of how potholes can create significant [negative publicity](#) for Waka Kotahi, not just regionally but also [nationally](#).

Opportunity – increased funding

Through the 2021-24 NLTP, Waka Kotahi is investing \$2.8 billion in road maintenance - the most significant funding ever. Higher levels of funding are expected for some time, given it will take some years to return the network to a condition where potholes are less prevalent.

As we approach the summer maintenance season, we have an opportunity to explain why potholes appear, how we fix them – and critically, when. This will help off-set the perception we are not fixing potholes, while helping to build understanding of this issue ahead of next winter, when potholes will start reappearing.

What we are already doing

Over the past 12 months we have significantly increased the profile of road maintenance activity, especially on social media. We have trialled a number of approaches and found that telling stories about the people on the ground, doing great work in trying conditions, is the best way to communicate this mahi. Some examples of this are over the page:

Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency - Hawke's Bay and Gisborne
April 5 · 🌐

We'd like to acknowledge an incredible effort by our maintenance team to reopen the SH35 Mangahauini Bridge at Tokomaru Bay!

A bridge abutment was washed away after severe rain hit the East Coast in late March, leaving a 16-metre wide gap in the highway and cutting state highway access to communities north of Tokomaru Bay.

It was originally estimated the bridge would be reopened in mid-April, but it reopened to light vehicles over the weekend thanks to a huge repair effort. More than 4000 tonnes of rock was used to form the base for the new bridge support.

Nearly 120 people were involved in the repair and cleanup work on the highway, led by our contractor Downer, working closely with the local community.

A fantastic effort to reconnect communities and get the Coast moving. Check out these remarkable before-and-after pics showing the scale of work involved!



👍❤️ You and 227 others 18 Comments 27 Shares


Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency - South Island
September 1 at 11:05 AM · 🌐

What a difference 24 hours makes! This small section of State Highway 6 between Blenheim and Nelson has been transformed from a broken and buckled road to a fully-repaired surface, following recent storm and flood damage.


Our crews are putting in a massive effort to reinstate the state highways, get people moving, and reconnect communities throughout the top of the South Island.

There's still a huge amount of work remaining, so we appreciate everyone's patience and understanding. If you're travelling, please plan ahead and check the route, and be sure to give our teams a friendly wave when you see them.

Before



24 hours later



👍👏 You, Jacqui Newell, Phil Walsh author and 3K others 341 Comments 167 Shares

Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency - South Island
August 31 at 9:19 AM · 🌐

With vehicle access completely cut off to most of the Kenepuru Road on Kenepuru Sound, our contractors in the region have been using electric mountain bikes to assess damage and help direct recovery efforts.

Last week, with driving still impossible, two of our engineers arrived with their bikes along one end of the road by boat and made their way back to the other end along the damaged road. During this 75km trip, they identified and recorded the location of the many faults along the road.



👍❤️ You and 672 others 42 Comments 53 Shares

Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency Wellington
September 2 at 8:49 AM · 🌐

SH59 Paekākāriki to Pukerua Bay remains CLOSED as our contractors work hard to stabilise the hill which has had multiple slips this month.


All going smoothly the aim is to reopen the road in the week of 12 September.

A permanent repair is currently being undertaken with excavators working at the top and bottom of the hill to create a long-term stable slope rather than just a quick clean up.

Our crews have also taken advantage of this road closure to also do some maintenance including barrier repairs, tree pruning, and drainage works. They have also started on making the Pukerua Bay lookout safe where slips have undermined the footpath.

Residents can continue to access Pukerua Bay from the south and Paekākāriki resident access is from the north. All other road users to continue using SH1 as an alternate route.

Read the entire media release here: nzta.govt.nz/media-releases ^EH



👍👏 343 59 Comments 34 Shares

We will continue to focus on the people and the amazing work they do to keep the state highway network operational. We can also harness our content team's creative approach to tell the pothole story in an engaging, surprising and informative way.

Timing

As outlined above, potholes on the state highway and local road network arise due to a number of factors (increased freight traffic and weight volumes, weather events, and investment trends in maintenance). However, there is an organisational plan to address the long-term quality of the network along with our largest-ever planned maintenance programme.

Our communications opportunity starts with what we are doing about them – this summer we are undertaking the largest ever renewal programme seen in New Zealand: 2450 lane kilometres to be renewed or replaced between September 2022 and mid-2023.

Tactics

We have numerous creative ideas that will be refined over the coming weeks as we enter the renewal season, and several other ideas that we will activate over the next six to nine months.

Current tactics underway:

Tactic	Status + Notes
Potholes Explained	<i>First Cut</i> - An up-front explanation about why potholes appear, as part of a wider series about what we do to maintain roads - Rob Campbell Video
Pothole Animation	<i>Complete</i> - Use food items such as puff pastry and biscuits to replicate a road structure, then pour water in, freeze, and show the impact Potholes Explained . Positively received internally, and good external engagement on a LinkedIn post.
Pothole Response	<i>Complete</i> - Footage of Northland NOC undertaking pothole repairs. Northland maintenance
Day in the Life	<i>Underway</i> - Cover the important mahi our crews undertake, including pothole repairs. Could include senior contractor staff (GM level).
Proactive TV Media	<i>Not started</i> – Proactive media piece, take a reporter from Seven Sharp or The Project out for a day with a crew.
Public Messaging	<i>Not started</i> – Piece to camera from Brett Gliddon or Neil Walker, acknowledging potholes will be apparent on the network over winter, encouraging people to drive to the conditions and report faults via 0800 4 HIGHWAYS. Alternatively, piece to camera by RM for each region.
Proactive Radio Media	<i>Not started</i> – similar to the above, public messaging via RNZ or similar
Climate Impact	<i>Not started</i> – investigate linking MetService rainfall data to weather related damage on the network. Opportunity to tell a compelling climate related story. We are also looking at linking pothole locations with renewal locations to show the link between older surfaces wearing out and potholing, and renewals then taking place.
DRR Information	<i>Not Started</i> – Provide winter maintenance specific information for RTC meetings and other key stakeholder engagements. Time this to be ready for Autumn RTC meetings.
Letter Templates	<i>Complete</i> – Our legal team have reviewed the standard letter templates that contractors and Waka Kotahi use when responding to compensation requests.
Key Messaging	<i>Ongoing</i> – We developed key messaging regarding potholes during the 2022 winter period; these will be updated ahead of the 2023 winter period.
Billboard Messaging	<i>Not Started</i> - Pre-empt customer complaints by putting up signage at locations where we know a renewal will take place the next summer. This will help explain why the road condition is deteriorating.

Cones vs Potholes	<i>Not Started</i> - Advertising campaign that emphasises the fact that road cones means we are renewing roads, which prevents potholes.
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We have a number of supporting tactics in development, covering the wider road maintenance:

Tactic	Status + Notes
Contact Centre Messaging	<i>Complete</i> – the contact centre has been provided with messaging regarding potholes and other common road maintenance related complaints, to assist with call handling.
Maintenance Map	<i>Underway</i> - Interactive map showing all renewals planned for the 2022/23 season; public version expected to be available by October 2022.
Contractor Upskilling	<i>Ongoing</i> – Road Maintenance Comms & Engagement Guide has been released; engagement ongoing to embed this with contracts.
Infographics	<i>Ongoing</i> – Quarterly infographics showcasing the work being completed. Generally focused on renewals, however content can be changed to focus on reactive maintenance for some quarters.
Monthly Summaries	<i>Ongoing</i> – Overview of maintenance activity, shared to social media.
Joined-up Communication Approach	<i>Ongoing</i> – We look to elevate our communication to an overview level, providing national, regional or corridor approaches where possible
Seasonal Media Releases	<i>Ongoing</i> – Prior to summer and winter maintenance periods release regional and national media pieces that focus on key activities on the road.

Key messages

High level

- An increase in the presence of potholes is related to a combination of the time of year and wet weather, but also the age of some sections of the network.
- More frequent and severe weather events can have a significant impact on the network, and this can result in potholes appearing. Our contractors have crews out monitoring the network and ready to respond as quickly as they can.
- We do most of the long-term road renewals in the warmer months, as we can only do temporary fixes while the weather is cold and wet.
- We are committed to maintaining and operating a safe and accessible state highway network across New Zealand.
- We encourage road users to advise us of any issues they come across on the state highway network via 0800 4 HIGHWAYS (0800 44 44 49), to ensure we can be as responsive as possible.

What we are doing about it

- While we are challenged with more intense weather events and increasing demand on the network, our current focus is on improving the overall condition of the state highway network so that it is more resilient.
- The 2021-2024 NLTP represents a significant increase in maintenance funding with \$2.8 billion being invested into Maintenance & Operations, including an additional \$400million over the initial budget to be invested in renewing road surfaces and pavements.
- We have a plan to improve the overall condition of the network, however this will take time to achieve, due to the times of year we can complete renewals and rebuilds, and overall industry capacity and funding constraints.
- Our first construction season saw approximately 2200 lane kilometres of road resurfaced or rebuilt, which is approximately 10% of the network.
- The upcoming season is targeting 2450 lane kilometres, the largest ever single-season programme on the state highway network.

What are our contractors doing currently?

- Our contractors are required to formally inspect the state highway network on a regular basis, and during the wetter, colder months they will have teams patrolling the network to proactively fill potholes and undertake other quick maintenance activities.
- At night and over the weekend our contractors have crews that are 'on call'. They are activated through a process that starts when we are notified of an issue that needs immediate repair (like a pothole).
- Over the colder, wetter months (specifically May – August) we focus on 'holding' roads in their current state. This means you will see us filling potholes, undertaking minor repairs to failed sections of road, and other activities that ensure the road is operational.
- Full paving and surfacing remedial works need to be undertaken in the drier warmer (summer) months.
- We encourage the use of 0800 4 HIGHWAYS (0800 44 44 49) to advise us of any issue on the state highway network.
- If a road user damages their vehicle due to driving over a pothole Waka Kotahi recommends they contact their insurer in the first instance. If appropriate, the insurer will contact Waka Kotahi.

Gaining leverage – support from NOCs and Alliances

We are best equipped to communicate our work on potholes when we have support from our Network Outcome Contracts and Alliance partners. These are the people on the ground who capture and provide great content for us to feature in our communications.

We will continue to encourage our partners in the industry to provide this content to help us tell stories that are timely and relevant. This includes engaging with our NoC and Alliance crews, and filming activity on the ground across a wide range of networks, to reflect the full breadth of the state highway network.

This in turn supports our contractors by showing the value of their hard work.

Partners

The audience for this messaging is the wider public – everyone who uses our state highway network. But there are a number of key partners who can help us get this messaging out, by sharing and engaging with our content. We will keep these partners informed, and provide easy access to our content and messaging. These include, but are not limited to:

Internal	External	Other interested parties
Directors of Regional Relationships	Minister of Transport	Road Transporting Association NZ
Regional Leadership Teams	Associate Minister of Transport	NZ Trucking Association
Maintenance and Operations	Automobile Association	National Road Carriers Association
ELT	Local Councils and RTCs (who will be experiencing the same issue)	Heavy Haulage
Policy and System Planning	NZ Police	Ia Ara Aotearoa Transporting NZ
Programme and Standards	Contractors	
	Te Ringa Māimōa Transport Excellent Partnership (formerly known as REG)	

Next Steps

After gaining approval for this plan we will continue to work on our existing communication tactics, while also ensuring we look at different ways to convey the facts behind this issue.