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New benchmark for New Zealand's sustainable development progress released

Is New Zealand progressing towards or away from sustainable development? This is the question a new report by Statistics New Zealand addresses.

Measuring New Zealand's Progress Using a Sustainable Development Approach: 2008 presents an overview of New Zealand's economic, social, and environmental progress in the past 20 years. It presents 85 indicators across 15 topics, allowing readers to make their own judgement about whether progress in New Zealand is consistent with sustainable development.

Government Statistician Geoff Bascand said the report provided information to help people answer four questions about sustainable development, namely:

- Meeting our needs – how well do we live?
- Fairness – how well are our resources distributed?
- Efficiency – how efficiently are we using our resources?
- Preserving resources – what are we leaving behind for future generations?

"In considering the questions, how well do we live and how well are our resources distributed, the report shows that people living in New Zealand over the past 20 years have higher living standards with greater health expectancy, rising incomes, and lower death rates from crime," Geoff Bascand said.

"The progress in rising incomes has not been shared evenly over the period with the differences between those on high incomes and those on low incomes widening."

In relation to the questions, how efficiently are we using our resources and what are we leaving behind for future generations, the report finds increased labour force productivity, and rising efficiency in energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.

Geoff Bascand said the resources available to future generations showed mixed results.

"Critical aspects of the natural environment in the form of water quality, net greenhouse gases, and biodiversity appear to be moving away from sustainable development.

"Education attainment and the stock of productive assets over the period have increased while the proportion of Māori speakers of te reo Māori, an aspect of culture which is unique to New Zealand, has decreased slightly."

Some indicators are published for the first time. For example, a new measure shows that although our net greenhouse gas emissions have increased, a positive move towards sustainable development is that they've decreased in relation to our economic activity.

Also, a new measure that combines different lifestyle behaviours shows that one in seven New Zealanders have a healthy lifestyle. The behaviours analysed are non-smoking, safe drinking, sufficient physical activity, fruit and vegetable intake, and maintaining a healthy weight.

“The above findings are just a snapshot of what the report contains. The purpose of this report is to support debate, policy-making, and decisions around any activity that impacts on New Zealand’s progress. Progress is assessed in relation to the four big questions rather than simply counting the numbers of indicators getting better or worse, or inappropriately aggregating them.

“This report shows the direction of activity towards or away from sustainable development, not whether any particular activity is sustainable or not. The report’s special contribution is that it looks across measures of economic, social and environmental progress in a coherent and rigorous manner. The report informs debate on New Zealand’s progress and policy settings,” Geoff Bascand said.

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For a summary brochure and a full copy of the report, visit <http://www.stats.govt.nz/>

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