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Westport Case Study: Summary of Themes

Westport's geography and climate have made it prone to regular flooding throughout its history

- The town of Westport is built on a floodplain and sits at the mouth of the Buller/Kawatiri River. The Buller is the country's fifth-largest catchment, and it has the highest recorded flood flows of any river in New Zealand. Its reo Māori name is fitting: *Kawatiri* means *deep and swift*. On the opposite side of the town is the smaller Orowaiti River, and to the northwest, the Tasman Sea – meaning the town is surrounded by water on three sides.
- The West Coast is New Zealand's wettest region, due to moist air rising over the Southern Alps, cooling and being released as rain on the West Coast. Whereas most populated areas of New Zealand receive between 600 and 1,600mm of rain each year, on average more than 2,000mm of rain falls in Westport.
- The distinct West Coast climate, combined with the town's proximity to multiple bodies of water leaves it prone to coastal, river and groundwater flooding. Floods have occurred throughout the town's history, but climate change is increasing their severity and frequency. Some Westport residents told us that the total annual rainfall doesn't seem to have changed, rather that now 'it all comes at once.'

Climate change is making extreme weather events more severe and frequent

- In July 2021 and February 2022, the town experienced two major floods. The July 2021 event was caused by 690mm of rainfall over three days and led to more than 2,000 people being evacuated from their homes – almost half of the town's 4,600 residents. Insured losses were valued at around \$80 million. When visiting Westport, we heard how these floods have caused considerable trauma, and that they have left a mark on the town.
- At the same time, hot days (over 25° Celsius) are becoming more common and droughts are more prolonged, and projections show that these patterns will continue.

Westport is a tight-knit community with a strong history of self-sufficiency and emergency preparedness

- Due to their relative isolation from other parts of the South Island, Westport residents are very used to fending for themselves, and for supporting each other during hard times. People we met spoke proudly of 'being a Coaster', and of having a profound sense of responsibility to take care of their community.
- We heard many examples of hands-on support people both provided and received when homes and businesses were flooded – including neighbours helping to evacuate residents, and supporting each other with clean-up. People also spoke frankly about "getting on with it" and doing things themselves when extreme events hit – for example, removing fallen trees and clearing roads themselves rather than waiting for help.

- Much of the town's strong focus on emergency preparedness stems from its location on the Alpine Fault line, which has a 75% chance of having a major earthquake in the next 50 years. Westport residents told us that they know that the town could be cut off for weeks after a major earthquake, and this knowledge has driven a lot of their preparation measures.

Mining, agriculture and tourism are the biggest contributors to the local economy, and all are exposed to climate risks

Mining

- Westport was founded as a mining town – first for gold, then coal, and increasingly for minerals. Mining continues to have a strong presence in the community; many of the people we spoke to had connections to the industry.
- We heard how extractive industries support the local economy, employing hundreds of fulltime staff being a significant contributor to the region's GDP.
- We also heard how the sector is feeling the impact of climate change. For example, heavy rainfall disrupts the aerial ropeway system that moves coal around the mine, and causes road and rail line closures that interrupt the export of coal.
- The sector also supports the community with time, money and expertise. We were told that all fulltime staff at the Stockton mine have advanced first-aid training, making them a valuable civil defence resource. We also heard about Bathurst Resources' contributions to community resilience, such as purchasing communications infrastructure to support communities when they are cut off.

Agriculture

- Severe weather events can have devastating effects on farmers and on the local agriculture sector. Farmers we spoke to told us that the biggest challenge for them is often not flooding itself, but days and weeks following an event. During this period, they must continue to run their farm while also undertaking clean-up and repairs – often without their full staff. We heard about the toll this can take on farmers and their families, and how critical the support of the community is.
- One strong theme was the importance of clearing blocked roads and repairing damage to infrastructure quickly, so that farmers can continue with minimal disruption to their business. We heard how road access in particular is critical for deliveries of feed, fertiliser and diesel for generators, and for the tankers that collect milk.
- Another theme that came up often related to the regulatory complexity many farmers face – including around what they can do following an extreme event. We heard that it's often unclear what action farmers can take on their own land to clear rivers and repair laneways, for example. There were calls for greater clarity in this area to avoid the need for drawn-out processes, and lots of back and forth with councils, in the aftermath of an event. We were also told about the limitations of insurance in many cases – for example, that damage to laneways and fencing is not covered by insurance, which means a significant impact on the farm and huge costs to replace.
- Some of the farmers we spoke to also noted a growing number of warm days. We heard that some farmers are increasingly considering how to help stock cope with heat, and what future irrigation solutions to manage dry periods might look like.
- Several farmers spoke about changes in technology helping them manage their farm in bad weather. We heard about how important cellphone coverage is for farmers, including for tools that support efficient farming practices and for emergency preparedness. We also heard that the increasing prevalence of Starlink can help farmers stay online when cell phone towers are down.

Tourism

- The Department of Conservation manages a large amount of land around Westport, which is a significant draw for tourists. This includes the popular Paparoa Track Great Walk. DoC staff noted that there has been an increase in booking cancellations because of weather events in recent years, alongside increasing time repairing infrastructure. However, we also heard that there is still high demand from people wanting to come to the region, and that DoC staff feel the challenge of maintaining that visitor destination so that people can enjoy it under increasingly challenging circumstances.
- DoC staff told us that they are challenged doubly by severe weather – infrastructure damage (such as to fences) increases their workload, while the weather itself reduces the time available to do the repairs. As well, warmer weather is impacting species and biodiversity on DoC land: mice populations are increasing, and weeds are spreading faster.

Westport is isolated, and frequently becomes cut off in severe weather

- The West Coast has limited connections to the rest of the South Island and the linear transport networks (road and rail) between them are regularly affected by flooding and severe weather – most often from landslides or fallen trees.
- These routes are critical for connecting people to essential services and surrounding communities, and also for export and import. The majority of the region’s food comes from outside and the mining and agriculture industries both require road or rail access (or both) to transport their products.
- We heard how roading access is critical for providing assistance after a severe weather event – for repairs to houses, as well as to larger infrastructure like power lines and stormwater drains.

Since the 2021/22 floods, central government has supported a range of flood resilience measures

- In spite of the town’s challenges, Westport residents told us they are optimistic about the town’s future. There have been a number of recent investments in improving the town’s resilience and creating a vision for the town’s future.
- In June 2023 central government committed \$22.9 million to West Coast Regional Council (WCRC), Buller District Council (BDC), and Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Waewae to support initiatives to improve flood resilience.
- The projects in the package (called Resilient Westport) include a wide range of actions, including amending the building code for floor levels, building flood walls along the coast, and improving stormwater infrastructure.
- One part of this package of work was the Master Planning process. This was an iterative, design-based planning process that looked at short-, medium- and long-term options for residents of the Westport area.
- In late 2023, design firm Isthmus joined the project, and along with BDC ran a series of community engagement workshops focused on the town’s future. These workshops produced a plan to gradually develop a future home for Westport residents. The Master Planning process in Westport has been unique in many respects, including the innovative use of visual and storytelling tools to generate creative conversation about the town’s future and potential. BDC officially endorsed the Master Plan in March 2025, though it faces considerable uncertainty after local elections in October 2025.

People also told us what they need more of to support effective response and recovery

- Staff at Buller District council told us that national policy direction needs to be driven by longer-term thinking and planning. This is to avoid political cycles washing away years of progress – at the local or

central level. We heard a strong view that adaptation work should be locally led, but also that a clear mandate from central Government would help drive action forward.

- In our conversation with Regional Council staff we heard that accessing the information and expertise they need to support effective adaptation planning and action can often be challenging. We also heard that a strong mandate from central government, and monitoring to hold local government to account on adaptation planning and action, may help to drive the pace and quality of action.
- Some farmers in Westport told us that ‘chopping and changing’ of regulation makes it hard to get things done, including to prepare for and respond to extreme events. They called for clear and consistent regulations, and simplifying consent pathways under emergency. We heard that considerable back-and-forth can be required with council to get clarity, which takes time and energy and slows their ability to take action. Clear rules and guidelines around what farmers can do for themselves immediately following an event would enable them to get their land and business up and running again as efficiently as possible.
- We also heard that this would help with minimising the impact of floods before they hit. For example, some farmers spoke about the challenges undertaking work such as gravel extraction, rockwork and willow removal on their land, that they see as important for their farm’s resilience. Some of this type of work currently requires resource consent.

When it comes to talking about climate hazards, groups in Westport have tried a range of approaches

- Many of the groups we spoke to in Westport shared their experiences communicating information about climate hazards – be it an impending storm, future sea-level projections, or the possibility of moving the town’s location – to residents. We heard a strong sense that simple, clear and positive messages were the most effective when it comes to communicating change.
- Many spoke about the need to have concrete science and modelling to inform decision-making, but to not lead with it when talking to the public. For example, the Master Planning team told us that climate change still feels abstract or even debatable for some people in Westport. This led to them talking more broadly about the economic and community growth and opportunities the project could help to create, and as a motivation for the eventual relocation of the town.
- Similarly, many of the people we spoke to working in the civil defence and emergency management space told us that talking about preparations for a major earthquake on the Alpine fault was a valuable way to raise adaptation planning with residents in a very real and accepted way.