# New Zealand's critical infrastructure resilience questioned after recent communication failures



In the wake of two significant communications failures that occurred last week in Northland and Otago, questions have arisen about the resilience of New Zealand's critical infrastructure, highlighting ongoing challenges in strengthening the country's disaster preparedness.

The outages came within days of the government issuing a discussion document about a new Emergency Management Bill aimed at addressing vulnerabilities in essential services such as power, water, telecommunications, transportation networks, and digital systems. Despite these intentions, the recent failures have revealed that critical infrastructure remains insufficiently robust to withstand disruptions.

In Otago, two key fibre-optic cables near Dunedin were severed—one due to accidental damage by a contractor and the other reportedly by rodents—resulting in significant interruptions to phone and internet services. Meanwhile, in Northland, severe weather stemming from ex-cyclone Tam led to power outages that disrupted cellular networks. Authorities advised residents to use landlines as a fallback, though concerns were raised about the dependence of landlines on electricity in such scenarios.

Kelly Stratford, the Far North civil defence leader and deputy mayor, emphasised the need for decisive government intervention, urging officials to "wave the big stick" to enforce resilience measures. Industry voices echoed this call, with Electricity Networks Aotearoa highlighting repeated power outages caused by natural events and questioning when regulations would be updated to improve safety.

Local resident and Hokianga artist Lise Strathdee expressed concerns about the adequacy of the country's communication systems in emergency situations. Speaking to RNZ, she noted, "I think there's a lot of confusion. It's best to just push forward and realise what are the most important things, and definitely I would have thought in emergency events, communications... is one of the number one priorities. So what can the government do to address the critical infrastructure?" She also mentioned attempts by providers such as One New Zealand to offer mobile connectivity via satellite but cautioned that such solutions might not be accessible to all.

Infrastructure Minister Chris Bishop has identified improving the resilience of critical infrastructure as one of his top six priorities. Eighteen months ago, he proposed creating "enforceable minimum resilience standards" for companies operating vital services, as well as granting government powers to gather information regarding infrastructure upgrades. However, Cabinet papers released under the Official Information Act reveal that Bishop's proposals faced opposition from other Cabinet members—details of which have been redacted—leading to the withdrawal of a public consultation planned in 2023.

Bishop clarified to RNZ that he was not "blocked" from implementing regulations last year and confirmed ongoing efforts to explore a mix of non-regulatory and regulatory options. These include mandatory long-term capital and asset management plans, greater disclosure requirements on performance metrics, opportunities for workforce upskilling, and strengthened scrutiny and monitoring of infrastructure resilience. Despite these initiatives, the current discussion document on the Emergency Management Bill does not explicitly mention enforceable minimum standards.

New Zealand's vulnerability to natural disasters is well documented. The country ranks second only to Bangladesh in expected financial losses from such events relative to GDP. Official surveys highlight widespread public concern, with 92 percent of respondents worried about severe weather, 88 percent about major earthquakes, and 78 percent about cyber threats.

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) underscored the increasing vulnerability of people, property, and infrastructure in a November briefing to the government. Past disaster events, like the 2023 North Island storms that claimed 15 lives and Cyclone Gabrielle, which caused nearly half a billion dollars in damage and prolonged power outages, exemplify the stakes involved.

Efforts to legislate stronger infrastructure protections have seen setbacks over recent years. A Bill developed between 2018 and 2022 envisioned new planning, reporting, and information-sharing obligations for critical infrastructure entities but was widely regarded as insufficient and discontinued by the current government in March 2023. Among industry groups, the Telecommunications Forum has indicated support for minimum resilience standards, provided they do not stifle innovation and called for clearer government communication regarding regulatory expectations.

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment has maintained that telecommunications operators bear primary responsibility for the resilience of their networks. Meanwhile, issues such as the gradual removal of copper landline cables—expected to be completely phased out by 2030—have sparked debate over the role of legacy infrastructure in ensuring communication continuity during emergencies.

The Cabinet papers highlight a complexity in motivating improvements to infrastructure resilience, pointing to "five well-understood market failures" that create competitive disadvantages for companies investing in stronger systems. For example, consumers currently have no way to differentiate between networks based on resilience, diminishing incentives for providers to prioritise costly upgrades.

In response to these challenges, Cabinet established a new National Risk and Resilience Framework in December 2023, which details thirty national risks and assigns lead agencies for each. Concurrently, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon's department has shifted focus away from a general lead role on critical infrastructure towards cyber security and implementing this framework.

The Emergency Management Bill, anticipated to be introduced within the coming months and enacted by 2026, is expected to mark a pivotal step in advancing New Zealand's preparedness. However, officials acknowledge ongoing uncertainties; a recent discussion document reveals that nine months after attempts to restart public consultation, definitive identification and framing of the underlying issues remain under review.

As the country continues to confront frequent natural disasters and increasing cyber threats, the pace of transformative change in infrastructure resilience remains a subject of scrutiny and debate across government, industry, and communities affected by these disruptions.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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