

Media Release

6 December 2017

Protected Geckos Released Back Into The Wild By The Pūhoi to Warkworth Motorway Project

Protected geckos are being released back into the wild on December 5 by the team building the Ara Tūhono Pūhoi to Warkworth motorway.

The 36 forest geckos, one rarer Pacific gecko and one copper skink will be resettled at a new predator-free site within the wider project area. The exact location will be kept secret to ensure the geckos have privacy while they settle in.

The geckos have been at Massey University's Reptile Facility for several months under the care of an expert team of herpetologists. Because they were captured over late summer-autumn, five of the female geckos were pregnant and gave birth while in captivity. All native geckos give birth to live young - they don't lay eggs - and have a maximum of two young. Ten were born in captivity.

New "homes" are being prepared for the gecko in advance of their release, says Project Ecologist, Liza Kabrle. Soft foam covers are nailed to the north-facing side of trees, so they warm up in the sun. Each gecko will have its own cover, which will be labelled and GPS-located.

The skink is released directly into the new habitat, says Liza Kabrle.

The 18.5km Ara Tūhono Pūhoi to Warkworth motorway being built by private consortium the Northern Express Group (NX2) on behalf of the New Zealand Transport Agency, runs through the Pūhoi and Mahurangi River catchments. The area contains fragments of mature native forest, regenerating shrublands, wetlands and streams and coastal marine habitat.

The requirement to relocate nationally 'at risk' or 'threatened' species is part of a suite of resource consent conditions NX2 must comply with to minimise adverse effects on vegetation, animal, bird, fish and other species during the construction of the motorway.

Three geckos were taken last week to meet the kids at Warkworth Primary School. While it was a great chance for the children to get up close to the geckos, the project team also shared stories of how they were rescued, their environment and how the project works to protect native flora and fauna during construction of the motorway.

The capture and release of the geckos is part of ongoing conservation efforts by the project team while the motorway is being built.

Work began in October 2016 to identify and assess ecological habitats in the project area and find out what species were living there. Since then, the project team has been working closely with

Media Release

Before the diggers and big construction machinery moved in, a huge effort went into finding and relocating protected native species within the project area. This involved spotlighting for gecko at night, climbing trees looking for bat roosts and trawling streams for native crayfish and eels.

Tracking down some of the area's more elusive inhabitants, such as reptiles and snails, can be challenging, especially in steep terrain, and much of the work is done at night.

Liza Kabrle says the best way to find gecko is after dark with spotlights. "The light catches their white bellies in the trees making them relatively easy to spot when you know what you are looking for."

NX2 ecologists, working in partnership with Hōkai Nuku - the authorised voice of four iwi and hapū, mana whenua for the project area - spent days searching for species such as land snails, copper skink, forest gecko, Hochstetter's Frog and long-tail bats. They've also been busy setting nets, fishing in streams and installing artificial cover objects, affectionately known as "lizard hotels" to collect reptiles.

Hōkai Nuku works closely with the ecology team to ensure tikanga (protocols) and kaitiakitanga (obligation to protect and enhance mauri) values are upheld. Hōkai Nuku and the Kaitiaki team will continue to ensure ngā taonga tuku iho (precious resources) are protected and the effects of the project on ngā taonga tuku iho are minimised.

The Project

The Pūhoi to Warkworth project will extend the four-lane Northern Motorway (SH1) 18.5km from the Johnstone's Hill tunnels to just north of Warkworth. The motorway will improve driver safety and support the economic growth of Northland. It's also designed to have as little impact as possible on the living creatures that call the area home.

(Ends)

For further information please contact:

Theresa Walsh

NX2 Stakeholder & Communications Manager

E: theresa.walsh@nx2group.com

Mobile: 0274 522 111