

NEW ZEALAND ECONOMICS

CENTRAL NEW ZEALAND EARTHQUAKES

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CONTRIBUTORS

Cameron Bagrie
Chief Economist
Telephone: +64 4 802 2212
E-mail: cameron.bagrie@anz.com

Philip Borkin
Senior Economist
Telephone: +64 9 357 4065
E-mail: philip.borkin@anz.com

SOME QUICK THOUGHTS

The recent large earthquakes centred at the top of the South Island have caused considerable damage and disruption. Our thoughts are with all those affected. At this stage, assessing the economic impact of the quakes with any degree of accuracy is challenging. This note offers some quick thoughts.

BOTTOM LINE

- **The extent of damage and the costs involved remain up in the air.** While just speculation at this stage, the general consensus looks to be “in the billions”. Estimates could easily increase (we think they will) as the damage to key infrastructure is assessed, with aftershocks continuing and questions being asked about some Wellington CBD buildings.
- **With the economy already operating at or near capacity, this is a vastly different backdrop than during the Christchurch quakes.** The economy is now in a full-blown expansion as opposed to a recovery; the latter is easier to snuff out with negative shocks. Finding the necessary resources will present challenges for the reconstruction effort; in a capacity-constrained economy the “boost” from a rebuild becomes negligible as you are merely shuffling resources around. There will be inflation consequences but the one-off impact can be looked through. Quality buildings will attract more of a premium and lower-tier properties will be shunned.
- **The near-term hit to GDP is also uncertain, but looks modest across the aggregate economy.** We are likely to see a small dent in activity over the next quarter or two, and while there will be the obvious boost once the rebuild gets underway, it will need to be absorbed by reallocating resources. The event is negative overall; capital stock has been destroyed and will need to be rebuilt. That’s not productivity enhancing for the existing base.
- **A solid growth and yield backdrop will continue to support the NZD. However, the risk premium associated with NZD will need to rise and this will dent the attractiveness of carry (though not completely undermine it).** We do not expect recent NZD softness to extend too far.
- **The Government has the capacity to absorb rebuild costs, either directly or indirectly through the EQC (for residential damage).** We expect larger cash deficits and a slightly higher debt profile but we are talking about a margin-of-excellence tweak. At present, net debt is only 25% of GDP and cash deficits are less than 1% of GDP. The EQC has access to \$4.7b in reinsurance protection (less the deductible). Rebuild requirements in a capacity-constrained environment will lengthen the tail of public sector investment. Talk of a possible credit rating upgrade (which had been speculated by some) can be put to bed. Rebuild demands will tap any cash that was available for election sweeteners.
- **Some key longer-term strategic questions should be raised** surrounding where investment should be made given earthquake risks, key transport links and the public/private ownership of assets.
- **It will be the small things** (e.g. shifts in inter-regional migration flows, business continuity plans, fallout across the insurance sector, the length and extent of disruption to roading and rail infrastructure) **that are hard to ascertain but critical to understand.** At present we are flying blind.

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KEY POINTS

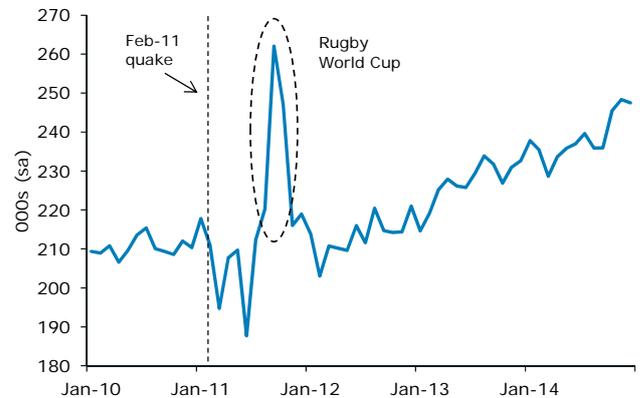
It is likely to be some time before the full extent of damage is known. Aftershocks are continuing (large in some cases), so it is quite possible that early estimates of damage will be ramped up. In fact, historical experience (Bâth's Law) would suggest a high chance of an aftershock of magnitude above 6.5 and as the Christchurch quakes showed, this is unlikely to be in the same location as the initial event.

But at this stage, the majority of damage seems to be to horizontal infrastructure (roading and rail etc), although damage to some commercial buildings in the Wellington CBD is a major unknown. Residential damage seems to be relatively moderate, largely because the quake epicentre was in a low-density area, which is a big difference to the 2010/11 Canterbury quakes.

The key influence on the hit to near-term growth looks to be centred on the disruption to transport and freight links. Significant disruptions to road and rail linkages between the top of the South Island and Christchurch have been seen. Wellington Port has also been damaged. How quickly those links can be restored or alternatives found will have a key influence on activity levels and supply chains. Increased use of coastal shipping has been mooted, but will take time to implement both from a logistics and capacity point of view.

The tourism sector will be dented, but only modestly. It will clearly impact North Canterbury severely, but should boost neighbouring regions such as the West Coast as visitors redirect their travels. There was little noticeable long-term impact on total visitor arrivals from the Canterbury earthquakes (although the Canterbury tourism sector itself is yet to fully recover). While arrivals initially fell after the 2010/11 quakes, it is hard to determine whether this was the direct result of the quakes or due to timing factors related to the Rugby World Cup (RWC) later in the year. It is possible that visitor arrivals would have fallen over this period anyway as visitors delayed travel in order to coincide with the RWC.

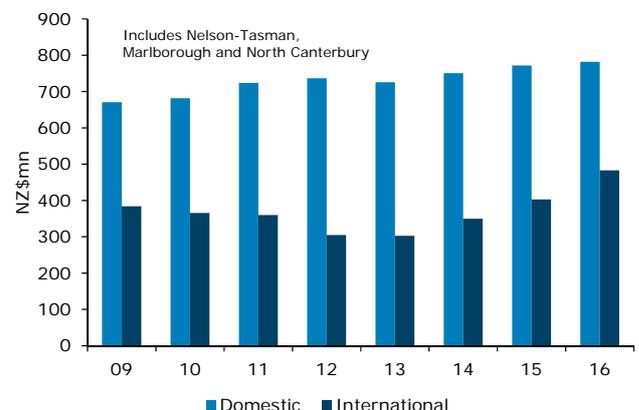
FIGURE 1: INTERNATIONAL VISITOR ARRIVALS



Source: ANZ, Statistics NZ

However, the impact on Kaikoura and North Canterbury will be massive. We are heading into summer, with retailing, hospitality and tourism particularly key for the region's economy. In the year to September, international tourists spent an estimated \$72m in the Kaikoura district directly. Domestic tourists spent an additional \$48m. The figures are \$482m and \$782m respectively when looking at international and domestic tourist spending for the North Canterbury, Marlborough and Nelson-Tasman regions more broadly. Given roading damage, it is difficult to see any degree of normality returning to the region within a year. The roading damage appears extremely difficult to fix. The Government has already signalled its intention for a financial support package for businesses in the region.

FIGURE 2: TOURIST SPENDING IN NORTHERN SOUTH ISLAND REGIONS



Source: ANZ, MBIE

Migration inflows may slow. They did after the Canterbury quakes (at least initially). However, it is hard to see them falling back significantly, particularly as the demand for labour resources is only going to intensify. More interesting will be internal migration patterns. Wellington had started to

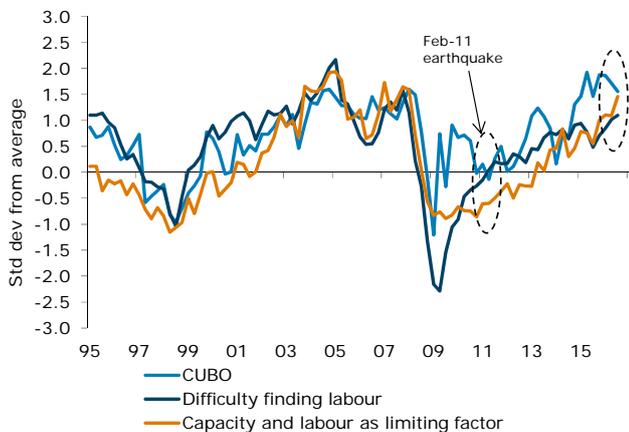
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see a real 'Auckland relocation factor' given Auckland housing affordability issues. That will likely slow (or reverse?).

The construction sector will obviously receive an additional boost. That will be from direct rebuild work but also an ongoing push for earthquake strengthening work in other regions. Quality buildings will attract a price and rental premium, while lower quality buildings will be shunned.

However, with the construction sector already capacity constrained, there will be limits to how quickly activity can be ramped up further, if at all. Firms are already saying that labour is extremely difficult to find. That was not the case in 2011 – to the same extent at least. We had also felt that as the Canterbury rebuild matured, resources would head north to assist with pressures in the likes of Auckland. That will be more restricted now. **We are therefore hesitant to upgrade our medium-term growth forecasts on account of the rebuild effort given these capacity constraints. The additional boost will require resources to be shifted from elsewhere.**

FIGURE 3: INDICATORS OF RESOURCE AND CAPACITY PRESSURES

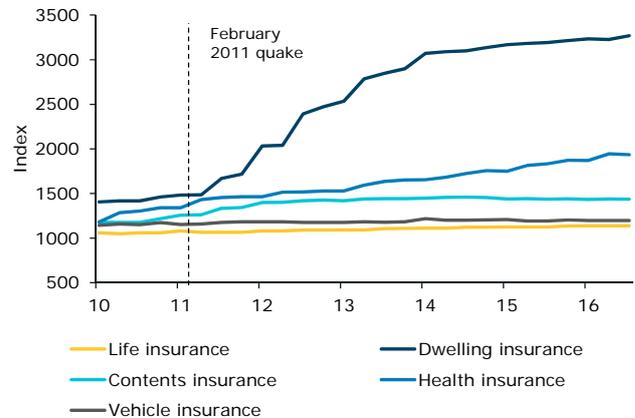


Source: ANZ, NZIER

The inflationary consequences look likely to be modest, but will be in only one direction.

Insurance premiums will head only one way as New Zealand once again gets reassessed across the global re-insurance market. Dwelling insurance premiums more than doubled after the Canterbury quakes and further gains are likely. We wonder whether some in high-risk areas will even be able to access private sector insurance going forward. Anecdotally, we are hearing that there is now a seven-day stand-down period for any new insurance policies, as insurers take an ultra-cautious approach.

FIGURE 4: INSURANCE PREMIUMS



Source: ANZ, Statistics NZ

Construction cost and wage pressures will only intensify as the rebuild effort gets underway and pressures in the transport space may also result in cost and price increases. The RBNZ has the ability to look through these effects (and will do so), but the economy is operating at full capacity now; it wasn't during the Christchurch quakes. That matters.

The Government has plenty of capacity to absorb the costs involved. To the extent that the damage largely centres on infrastructure, the bill will be footed mainly by the Government. For any residential damage, costs will be met first and foremost by the EQC, which in its 2015/16 Annual Report stated that it had access to \$4.7bn in reinsurance monies (less the deductible). It also has an explicit guarantee from the Crown to meet any payments if it is unable to do so (which is possible, given the reduced reserves in the National Disaster Fund). And with the fiscal accounts back in surplus and net debt relatively low at around 25% of GDP, we see few issues with the Government funding repair costs by running larger cash deficits (currently less than 1% of GDP) and higher levels of debt. The accounts have been buoyed by the stronger economy, with tax revenue already running close to \$800m ahead of Budget forecasts. This solid fiscal starting point reinforces the importance of having money put away for that inevitable rainy day, which has been a key part of the Government's strategy. That said, talk of a credit rating upgrade (speculated by some) can be put to bed.

The real issue is whether the quake alters some of the Government's priorities going forward.

Certainly the mooted tax cuts for 2017 look unlikely to be delivered and the Government will now have less headroom for a pre-election lolly scramble in the 2017 Budget. Capital plans will certainly need to be prioritised, especially in a capacity-constrained economy, and some of it will need to be strategic

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given the damage to State Highway 1 and the associated railway line. Some hard questions will need to be asked about the viability of current routes and where investment should be made given the obvious earthquake risks.

The market is not reading too much into it at this stage, with the **NZD and bond markets having taken it well**. We think this is broadly appropriate. While it is a dampening influence on the solid New Zealand story, it is really a margin-of-excellence tweak.

The shine was already coming off the NZD with the upward movement in global rates denting carry, and it is not surprising that an event such as an earthquake has dented it further. The risk premium associated with the NZD will rise. It is unlikely to be a game changer and define a new trend, but is likely to take the NZD lower. That said, we do not expect recent NZD softness to extend too far given still-solid economic credentials.

We do not buy into the view that this increases the odds of additional monetary policy easing as was seen after the Christchurch quakes. That would require a significant hit to confidence and activity, which we do not envisage at this stage. Unlike back in 2010/11, the economy is currently in a full-blown expansion as opposed to a recovery. In fact, the economy had actually fallen back into recession in late 2010 and so an argument about whether easing would have been delivered irrespective of the quake can certainly be made. But the economic context is important, as when an economy is recording strong momentum, it has a great deal more resilience to cope with negative shocks.

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