

24 September 2025

SUBMISSION OF THE NEW ZEALAND MIXED MARTIAL ARTS FEDERATION
ON: THE REGULATORY SYSTEMS (INTERNAL AFFAIRS) AMENDMENT BILL 2025

Introduction

1. The New Zealand Mixed Martial Arts Federation (NZMMAF) welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission on the Regulatory Systems (Internal Affairs) Amendment Bill. It also requests the opportunity to speak to these submissions in-person before the Select Committee.
2. While this Bill is presented as a routine regulatory systems amendment, the repeal of the Boxing and Wrestling Act 1981 (the Act) is not a minor matter. It is a substantive policy decision with far-reaching implications for the safety, integrity, and governance of combat sports in New Zealand.
3. NZMMAF supports repeal of the outdated Act. However, we cannot support repeal without replacement. To repeal the Act without putting a new framework in place would leave combat sports entirely unregulated in law, exposing participants and the public to unacceptable risks. Combat sports are inherently high-risk and thus require a clear and enforceable regulatory framework.

NZMMAF Background

4. NZMMAF is the national sporting organisation (NSO) responsible for governing the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) in New Zealand. MMA is a full-contact combat sport that permits the use of both striking and grappling techniques, standing and on the ground, drawn from a range of martial arts and combat sports disciplines (such as boxing, wrestling, judo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, karate, kickboxing, and others).
5. MMA competition is conducted under the Unified Rules of MMA,¹ with weight classes, timed rounds, approved protective equipment, and safety requirements. The sport is distinct from the traditional martial arts as it integrates multiple disciplines within a single framework.
6. NZMMAF was established in 2011 by combat sports practitioners in the absence of clear national leadership for the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) in New Zealand. Its purpose was to support amateur MMA fighters representing New Zealand at international competitions.
7. NZMMAF's purpose has since evolved to provide guidance and regulatory oversight of MMA for participants, to provide safe and transparent pathways for competition, and to engage with government and sporting authorities on matters of regulation. NZMMAF received formal

¹ Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts, Association of Boxing Commissions, see <https://www.abcboxing.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Unified-Rules-of-MMA-8.2025.pdf>.

recognition from Sport New Zealand in 2016 and is currently an investment eligible partner of Sport New Zealand but does not receive any funding under this status. NZMMAF has actively advocated to Sport New Zealand for law reform in the combat sports space.

8. NZMMAF is aligned with United World Wrestling (UWW), the IOC-recognised body responsible for wrestling, pankration, and amateur MMA. This alignment connects New Zealand with the Olympic family and necessitates our standards reflecting international best practice.

Evolution of the current framework and failures of the Act

9. The Boxing and Wrestling Act 1981 is not a modern regulatory framework. It evolved from the Boxing and Wrestling Regulations 1958, which in turn came from The Police Offences (Boxing Contest) Regulations 1931. The purpose of those instruments was not to ensure athlete safety or to uphold the integrity of sport. They were designed to address concerns of the time: illegal gambling, gang involvement in contests, and the need for police powers to manage events.
10. While those issues are now dealt with under other legislation, the health and safety risks of combat sports remain unaddressed. The 1981 Act does not provide for medical standards, concussion protocols, anti-doping, or modern integrity expectations. As a result, promoters and athletes are left in a regulatory vacuum, with inconsistent oversight and no clear accountability mechanisms.
11. The Act has not kept pace with the evolution of combat sports. MMA, for example, did not exist when the Act was drafted. The sport was first introduced, in its early form, in 1993, with the first in-cage event in New Zealand in 1997. As a result, MMA and other modern codes, such as kickboxing, fall entirely outside the scope of the Act.
12. Despite its age, the 1981 Act is currently the only statutory reference point for combat sports in New Zealand. Repealing it outright, without replacement, would leave a regulatory vacuum at precisely the time when combat sports are growing in popularity and participation.
13. The inadequacy of the current framework is already visible in the harm that has occurred under it.
14. **Deaths:** Since at least 2010, there have been multiple deaths in relation to combat sports training and/or contests. These deaths suggest that relying on the current permit process, voluntary standards and ad-hoc practices is not enough. Any replacement framework could pair enforceable event standards (medicals, cageside/ringside care, stand-downs) with mandated education and guidance for participants, so that concussion risks, cumulative trauma, and return-to-train/return-to-fight decisions are understood and applied consistently.²
15. **Cross-discipline participation:** NZMMAF is aware of instances where athletes who are knocked out in one discipline can, and have, competed in a different code the following week. A boxer who suffers a concussion may be stood down from boxing but can then fight under kickboxing or MMA rules almost immediately. This is unsafe, unmonitored, and has resulted in actual harm.

² Coroner's Reports for Carl BRADLEY, Neville KNIGHT, Lucy BROWN, Willman RODRIGUEZ GOMEZ, and Kain PARSONS are attached to these submissions.

16. **Exemptions:** The 1981 Act exempts amateur wrestling and the “Asian martial arts” from its scope. At the time, this reflected the sporting landscape of the 1950s and 1980s. As a result, MMA has grown into one of New Zealand’s most popular and fastest-growing combat sports without any legal framework around its governance or safety standards.
17. **Lack of accountability:** When harm occurs, no one is legally accountable. Participants can operate without enforceable responsibility. This lack of accountability is unacceptable in a sector where the risks are so obvious and the consequences so severe.
18. **Corruption and integrity risks:** Without enforceable regulation, there is inconsistency in how events are organised. Some promotions operate without adequate medical support, trained officials, or clear safety standards. This creates risks for athletes and undermines fair competition. NZMMAF has developed regulatory frameworks based on international best practice, but at present promoters may opt in or out of these standards. A statutory framework is needed to ensure that minimum requirements apply across the sector.
19. **Health and safety at events:** In New Zealand today, combat sports events can be run without an ambulance on site, without adequate medical staff, and without proper security. This is not acceptable in a modern sporting environment.
20. **Anticipating Emerging Combat Codes:** The Act was drafted in an era when boxing was the central focus of combat sport regulation. It did not anticipate the rise of new or hybrid combat sports such as Mixed Martial Arts, nor the growth of kickboxing, Muay Thai, and other codes now widely practised in New Zealand.
21. Any replacement framework must attempt to be future proof. It should not only regulate boxing but also provide principles and mechanisms flexible enough to apply to new or evolving codes. Without this, new disciplines risk falling through regulatory gaps, leaving participants without protection and promoters without clarity.
22. These failures demonstrate that the current framework is not protecting athletes, officials, or the public. Repeal without replacement only risks deepening these problems.

International comparisons

23. Many mature combat sports jurisdictions have a dedicated regulatory body.
24. In the United States, state-by-state athletic commissions regulate boxing, MMA, kickboxing, and other combat sport codes with enforceable suspensions, licensing requirements, and minimum health standards.
25. In Australia, state-based commissions exist, but NZMMAF is aware that some of those frameworks were imposed largely without the input of combat practitioners. As a result, many Australian combat practitioners see the regulations as political and impractical.

26. New Zealand must not repeat that mistake. Regulation must be co-designed with the combat sports community. A framework designed without combat expertise risks being ineffective at best and harmful at worst.

The case for a modern Combat Sports Regulatory Framework

27. NZMMAF submits that the repeal of the Act should lead directly to the development of a modern Combat Sports Act. Such an Act should contemplate, at a minimum:
- a. Placing health and safety, along with integrity, at its core.
 - b. Requiring mandatory medical standards, including the possible mandate of medical staff and ambulances at all events.
 - c. Establishing a national injury registry and enforce suspensions across all codes.
 - d. Licensing referees, judges, and officials, ensuring they are properly trained and vetted.
 - e. Providing clear authority for oversight and enforcement to the relevant NSO.
28. A Combat Sports Commission, comprised of representatives from across combat sports, sanctioned by government, and administered where necessary with executive support, would align New Zealand with international best practice. Such a Commission would reduce the burden on Police, create accountability, and ensure representation from all combat codes.
29. It is sometimes argued that combat sports should not be legislated because most other sports in New Zealand are not governed by statute. However, combat sports are distinct in that the risk of serious injury is not incidental but inherent to the activity. The dangers of concussion, trauma, and even death are well-documented and internationally recognised.
30. The current absence of a legislative framework leaves a gap where no government agency takes responsibility for these risks. NZMMAF has reached out to ACC for guidance on concussion protocols and looked to WorkSafe for clarity on promoter responsibilities. To date, there has been no guidance, no formal engagement, and no acknowledgement that these risks might fall within their remit. This lack of response illustrates the limits of relying on a purely self-regulated model.
31. A modern Combat Sports Act would not only create enforceable standards for participants but would also provide a clear mandate for government agencies to engage with combat sports in the same way they do with other high-risk sectors. To proceed without such a framework is to ignore obvious risks and place the burden of self-regulation on a voluntary basis, which experience has shown to be insufficient.

Recommendations

NZMMAF makes the following recommendations in relation to the Bill:

1. **Do not repeal without replacement.** The 1981 Act should not be repealed until a replacement framework is enacted, or without a clear plan for how the new framework will be developed.
2. **Develop a Combat Sports Act.** This Act should apply to all combat sports, not just boxing, and set enforceable safety and integrity standards.
3. **Establish a Combat Sports Commission.** This Commission should include practitioners from across codes, with government recognition, to oversee and enforce the Act within their codes. That oversight could include administering a national injury registry, mandating medical presence at events, standardising licensing of officials across codes.
4. **Co-design the framework.** Policymakers must work with combat sports practitioners, not design the framework in isolation.

Conclusion

32. The New Zealand Mixed Martial Arts Federation supports repeal of the Boxing and Wrestling Act 1981 Act but cannot support repeal without a replacement framework.

33. Any new framework must:

- a. Have athlete safety as a primary consideration.
- b. Set enforceable standards for promoters, gyms, and officials.
- c. Reflect international best practice.
- d. Be co-designed with the combat sports community.

34. Combat sports carry obvious risks. Policymakers cannot design effective regulation in isolation. The voice of combat practitioners is not optional — it is essential.

35. NZMMAF is already linked into global combat sports regulatory bodies and systems. The Association of Boxing Commissions and Combative Sports (ABC) sets the Unified Rules of MMA, and United World Wrestling the IOC-recognised body for wrestling that now includes amateur MMA. These connections give New Zealand direct access to tested international standards.

36. However, this is not only about MMA. A replacement framework must be developed in consultation with all combat sports codes and their governing bodies (or closest equivalents), to reflect the diversity of practice in New Zealand. Combat sports have unique risks and nuances that policymakers cannot grasp without combat practitioners at the table, leading the conversation. Overseas examples show that when regulation is imposed without sport expertise, frameworks become political rather than practical.

37. NZMMAF stands ready to contribute its expertise, alongside other combat codes, to ensure any replacement Act genuinely protects athletes, upholds integrity, and provides a sustainable foundation for the future of combat sports in New Zealand.