Submission of Aotearoa Water Action on the Healthy Waterways Plan

1. Aotearoa Water Action would like to make the following brief comments on MfE’s Healthy Waterways Plan:

2. Firstly, we fully support the direction taken in the discussion document and would like to congratulate the Ministry staff for the work they have done.

3. Secondly, rather than detailing our position on each issue we’d like to support the position of the Environmental Defence Society set out in their submission. We support that submission in its entirety, including the proposed drafting amendments to the NPSFM. We would, however, like to add a couple of points for discussion or emphasis:

4. The quality of our surface water and shallower ground water is now alarmingly poor in many parts of NZ. For too long our economic system has prioritised GDP growth, export receipts, overseas Investment, development, and the promise of jobs (any sort of job), over the health of our water and communities. That must stop right now. We hope that as the Panel considers these submissions it will remember that there is a significant financial cost incurred by ratepayers, taxpayers and citizens when we go about treating water, treating sick people and animals, removing chlorine from drinking water, informing communities of contamination, recharging aquifers, rehabilitating ecosystems and buying bottled water. There are also long-term economic costs incurred when we lose our precious soil as run-off.

5. If the toughest options become a part of the new directives it will undoubtedly be hard on some families and communities, but not nearly as hard as it will be for future generations if we don’t take strong action now. Our position is that in finalising these regulations the Government must start as it means to continue – by upholding the proposed te mana o te wai hierarchy i.e. by prioritising the health of water and then people ahead of other considerations. At the same time, we must do everything we can to support farming
communities through the transition to land use practices that will ensure we meet our water and emissions targets.

6. We want to emphasise our support for the proposed Te Mana o te Wai hierarchy of obligations: that the first priority is the health of the water, the second priority is providing for essential human health needs, such as drinking water, and third is other consumption and use.

However, in our opinion where water allocation is scarce there must also be a hierarchy for ‘other consumption and use’. We can not protect te mana o te wai or te mauri o te wai if we continue to ignore the cultural, environmental and social effects of the way in which we use water i.e. if we continue to ignore the effects of ‘other’ uses of water – such as irrigation or bottling – on water. To sustainably manage our wai we must start to assess and manage the effects of the way it is used.

Therefore, AWA believes the Government should direct regional councils to create rules in their plans to allocate water amongst competing activities. Powers granted under s30RMA already allow them to do this and we would argue that Part 2 s5 (the purpose of the Act) requires them to do so now that available allocation and clean water is becoming scarce.

7. We do believe this package can improve water quality but only if it is properly resourced. Therefore, we would support funding over and above the proposed $220 million. We also strongly support the establishment of the proposed independent freshwater commission and the proposed new planning process for freshwater (subject to seeing the detail including the ways Government proposes to protect the commission from undue influence by industry lobbies).

8. On unintended consequences:

If the package it is not properly resourced, we believe that high levels of farming debt in some parts of the country may tip the balance in favour of foreign ownership and uses of land and water other than food production. Already many farms have varied their water consents to allow for water bottling and other farms are being sold for planation forestry. We’d like the Government to be sure it will not be fixing one set of problems by creating
another. Therefore, we suggest reassessing not only the proposed funding package but also our overseas investment regulations (or at least the Ministerial Directive Letter) to avoid unintended consequences.

We would also like to see the Government add provisions to the NPSFM directing regional councils to include a rule in their plans prohibiting the use of water for water bottling. This would effectively place a moratorium on new applications for consent for this activity.

The Government spends $30 million each year encouraging foreign investment (via the IGF Fund and the ‘Focus 700’ group). We don’t know which companies receive funding, but we do know is that there is no environmental, social or cultural policy guiding either the distribution of that fund or the agency that distributes it. Therefore, we recommend that as a part of the holistic approach to the healthy waterways work, the government develops (at least) environmental criteria to guide its NZ Inc. strategies and IGF investments. This would help to ensure we are not spending money encouraging investment that will put water and communities and our climate at increased risk. We also suggest the Government redirects much of the IGF Fund to support this package of work.

We should also make the regulations as efficient as possible to ensure funds are not wasted on consent applications when they would be better spent on fences and riparian/wetland planting. Therefore, we support tough permitted activity rules as an option, and the use of prohibited activity status for activities that generate significant adverse effects on soil and water (such as winter grazing and feedlots). For the same reason we do not support compulsory farm plans – strong rules are preferable.

9. We strongly support (in principle) the Ministry’s proposed direction on stormwater, wastewater and protecting drinking water catchments and look forward to submitting on the detail in the future.

10. Finally, this package fails to consider the impact of other contaminants such as pesticides, herbicides, hormones and antibiotics. These toxins are commonly used, and we know they are present in our surface and groundwater. However, their impact on water bodies remains unmonitored and unregulated. We point this out only to suggest that the Ministry’s work in this space is far from complete.
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N.B. We would like the opportunity to speak to the select committee.