Proposed National Direction for Essential Freshwater - Submission from Waitaki District Council

Introduction

1. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the essential freshwater programme.

2. This submission is from the Waitaki District Council. Regarding clarification or further questions about this feedback, in the first instance please liaise with Policy and Strategy Manager, Waitaki District Council, phone 03 433 0300 or email

3. As a member of the Canterbury Mayoral Forum we have had input into that forum's submission which has taken a whole-of-region overview. The Waitaki District Council submission is from our position as an operator and provider of drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater facilities.

General Feedback

4. The Waitaki District Council supports the general intention of improving water quality but we also raise a concern that this will come at a cost to our small ratepayer base. We acknowledge that the government has allocated funding to support the transition but this funding is not a direct cash injection and we submit that consideration should be given to providing funding to councils to lessen the financial burden on our ratepayers.

5. We also raise the concern that a large burden for the changes will fall with the primary production sector. Our rural support industries and towns thrive when our rural sector is thriving but increased costs on this sector will impact on the viability of farming operations and consequently on the businesses and towns servicing this sector.

6. The proposed essential freshwater programme has wide ranging implications for our community and we share a commonly held view in our community that this consultation phase is too short. We suggest that this could be partly rectified by holding a second round of consultation post redrafting of the documents currently being consulted on.
Specific Feedback

SECTION 4.7 (SETTING AND CLARIFYING POLICY DIRECTION)

Page 36, Question 9. Do you support the 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?

7. We also recognise the essential value of water, and acknowledge that maintaining and restoring the health of water is of high priority. However, we do have concerns about it taking priority over supporting human health through the provision of safe drinking water.

8. The impact of this policy approach would be most notable for water supplies within our district that must be upgraded to supply safe drinking water and meet the Drinking Water Standards. Upgrade decisions would potentially require a different and significantly costlier approach in order to ensure the health of the water is prioritised over drinking water supply. Additionally, for some of our remote supplies, there is only one available localised drinking water source. If source takes are limited or restricted for the sake of the health of the water, we question how we would be able to practically and cost-effectively deliver safe, essential drinking water to our communities and whether there would be Central Government funding available to ease the resulting financial and economic impact.

SECTION 5.13 (RAISING THE BAR ON ECOSYSTEM HEALTH)

Page 53, Question 30. Do you support introducing new bottom lines for nitrogen and phosphorus? Why/Why Not?

9. Although we recognise and understand the rationale for these, we question whether the bottom lines are justified and realistic in practice. Our key concern is applying a blanket approach across waterways that are distinctive in their ecology and context. Does it make sense to have the same bottom line for the Waikato River as for the Ómārama Stream?

Question 31. If this proposal was implemented, what would you have to do differently?

10. Although most of our wastewater treatment plants have recently been upgraded to meet increased requirements, they would be unable to achieve the proposed bottom lines and would need further upgrading at significant additional cost to our ratepayers. This is of concern given that we have a relatively small ratepayer base with lower than average household incomes.

11. In addition, we have concerns about industry capacity and capability to undertake the required upgrade design and construction. Like other councils, we currently struggle to source the required number of appropriately qualified and skilled engineering consultants and contractors, so have serious concerns about the additional pressure these requirements will place on already stretched resources.

12. Ultimately, our communities can't afford ongoing upgrades. Will Central Government funding be made available to ease the impact?
Question 38. Do you have any comment on proposed telemetry requirements?

13. We consider these to be achievable, but note from our experience that they will be significantly more expensive than the estimates to install and maintain provided within the document.

14. We note that they would negate the need for the submission of annual reports, saving resources and staff time.

SECTION 6.3 (SUPPORTING THE DELIVERY OF SAFE DRINKING WATER)

Page 56, 43. Do you agree with the proposed amendments to the Drinking Water NES? Why/Why Not?

15. We agree risk management is important for protecting source water and that some proximate activities must be restricted. However, it is unclear to us within the proposal what types of activities would be restricted within these areas.

16. We are also concerned about what impact this may have on current and future adjacent landowners, and whether it will impact our ability to find land on which to construct these facilities. It is likely that it will be challenging to gain permission to construct something on private land if it significantly restricts what owners can do on their land.

Question 45. Do you have any other comments?

17. We question who is going to enforce this and what funding and resources will be made available to enable this to happen effectively. The 3 Waters and related sectors are experiencing a skills shortage and this is projected to continue into the future. This will seriously impact not only on our ability to meet requirements, but on associated monitoring and enforcement activity.

SECTION 7.4 (BETTER MANAGING STORMWATER AND WASTEWATER)

Page 62, Question 46. Does the proposed Wastewater NES address all the matters that are important when consenting discharges from wastewater networks? Will it lead to better environmental performance, improve and standardise practices, and provide greater certainty when consenting and investing?

18. It is unclear how this relates to discharges from non-engineered overflows (i.e. emergency network overflows).

19. Otherwise, we anticipate this policy will streamline consent application preparation and processing time and speed up IWI consultation processes. We anticipate it will also enable better long term planning as quality targets will be known and infrastructure upgrades designed and budgeted for.
Question 47. Do you agree with the scope of the proposed risk management plans for wastewater and stormwater operators? Are there other aspects that should be included in these plans?

20. The scope of these seem to be appropriate and is similar to that of a Water Safety Plan.

21. We anticipate that the implementation of those plans would be similar to Water Safety Plans, but will await further confirmation of this.

22. Based on our experience writing and implementing Water Safety Plans, we expect a significant investment of resource will be required to write and implement the proposed risk management plans. As noted earlier in this submission, we are currently struggling to meet current requirements and there is a nation-wide industry skills shortage which will impact on our ability to meet this requirement. This industry-wide skills shortage needs to be addressed urgently and we consider central government has a leadership and enabling role in this (for example through amendments to immigration rules and nationally standardised training and certification).

Question 48. What specific national level guidance would be useful for supporting best practice in stormwater policy and planning and/or the use of green infrastructure and water sensitive design in stormwater network design and operation?

23. We think direct access to an advisor to assist in transitioning and implementing the required practices into our current operation would provide the greatest benefit, in addition to supporting guidelines and other support.

Question 49. What are the most effective metrics for measuring and benchmarking the environmental performance of stormwater and wastewater networks? What measures are most important, relevant and useful to network operators, regional councils, communities and iwi?

24. The current measures are effective particularly the level of compliance with consent conditions.

25. The current measures focusing on dry weather overflow events should potentially be expanded to include wet weather events as it is during these events that wastewater often ends up in the environment.