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Report confirms serious challenges for rivers

New Zealand's rivers and lakes are under increasing pressure, according to the latest national report from the Ministry for the Environment and Stats NZ about the state of fresh water.

Our fresh water 2017, released today, measures the quality of our waterways; water quantity and flows; biodiversity in rivers and lakes; and the cultural health of fresh water.

Key findings from the report are:

- nitrogen levels are getting worse at 55 percent and getting better at 28 percent of monitored river sites across New Zealand
- phosphorus levels are getting better at 42 percent and getting worse at 25 percent of monitored river sites across New Zealand
- of the 39 native fish species we report on, 72 percent are either threatened with or at risk of extinction
- *E.coli* levels are 22 times higher in urban areas and 9.5 times higher in pastoral rivers compared with rivers in native forest areas
- 51 percent of water allocated for consumptive use is for irrigation, and 65 percent of that is allocated to Canterbury.

Government Statistician Liz MacPherson said the regular environment reports were important in providing a national picture of the state of our environment while acknowledging regional variations.

"This helps us see where the greatest pressures are and where we are performing well," she said. "Today's report confirms our freshwater environment faces a number of serious challenges."

Secretary for the Environment Vicky Robertson said land use clearly affected the state of fresh water in this country. "This report confirms our urban waterways are the most polluted but we are seeing more declining trends in pastoral areas and it's important we do something about it now and continue to track any progress."

More information was still needed on fresh water biodiversity. "It's clear many species are under pressure. Of the 39 native fish species we report on, 72 percent are either threatened with or at risk of extinction. About a third of native freshwater plants and invertebrates are also at risk," Ms Robertson said.

"Recently there has been a strong focus on how swimmable our waterways are, but that is just part of the story. The implications for our freshwater species are really critical.

"Many of our species are found nowhere else in the world so it is even more crucial we don't lose any under our watch. We need to consider the resilience of all species in any decisions we make that affect the environment."

Other recent reports also demonstrated the significant impact from human activity on our fresh water quality and quantity and on our ecosystems, habitats and species, Ms Robertson said.

“The more studies there are, the better we understand the impact people have on fresh water. However, we can’t wait for perfect data to act. This report identifies some key issues we can focus on for actions.”

Ms MacPherson said *Our fresh water 2017* used the best available data and was independently quality assured. “Good science, data, and information have the potential to shape our choices and the impact we have on our environment at the national, regional, and community level.”

More work was needed on collecting and reporting consistent data on fresh water, including filling gaps in our knowledge, said Ms MacPherson. “It will take time and effective collaboration to get the reliable, well-structured, and relevant statistics we need and we are continually looking at ways to improve data for future reports.”

Ms MacPherson noted that as with the other reports in the environmental reporting series, *Our fresh water 2017* was focused on providing underlying evidence to help inform policy responses and the public debate.

“Past experience shows where we focus our energy, we can make a difference,” said Ms Robertson. “Over time we have become better at identifying and addressing point source pollution in water. Good fertiliser and erosion management in some areas appears to have helped decrease phosphorous in some waterways. We must explore more ways to effectively improve our most vulnerable waterways.”

The report is the second since the Environmental Reporting Act came into effect in June 2016. The next report – about atmosphere and climate – will be out in October 2017.

More information:

Infographic: <http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/environmental-reporting/new-zealands-fresh-water-glance>

Full report: <http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/environmental-reporting/our-fresh-water-2017>

Indicator pages: http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/environment/environmental-reporting-series/environmental-indicators/Home/Fresh%20water.aspx

For media enquiries, hi-res copies of the infographic or photos of spokespeople, please contact:

Ministry for the Environment media enquiries, 027 231 6930

Stats NZ, Marina Skinner, 021 792 260