



Upgrading water

We are moving steadily towards safeguarding our two biggest export industries in making progress on water quality.

New Zealand's business profile is unusual, with our top two export earners being dairy and tourism.

Both depend on water.

The high quality - high output nature of New Zealand's dairy industry demands careful use of plentiful clean water on every farm.

And our particular brand of tourism offering requires an almost fanatical focus on water quality in lakes, rivers and streams.

Overseas tourist destinations are often developing countries that have reasonable water management inside the resorts and other tourist areas but poor sewerage and water infrastructure elsewhere else.

By contrast New Zealand's tourism brand requires sparkling water everywhere. We are expected to have outstanding water for all recreation purposes while also allocating water for farming and industrial uses.

Stewarding water resources for two very different industries - dairy and tourism - is a sophisticated task.

Among other things, a national conversation is required - over recent years we've debated water issues a lot. Science, planning, money, and action are also needed.

We are making progress.

Last week the Government released revised water quality targets, based on recommendations of the Land and Water Forum and on what has been achieved so far.

Achievements in dairy have been significant.

Waterways have been fenced off, water edges planted and water storage and reticulation systems have been installed at significant cost in many farms.

(Stock exclusion is not just the focus of dairy - beef and other livestock farms are also being actively sent the message about the desirability of fencing waterways and installing water reticulation.)

With dairy cattle excluded from the vast majority of waterways through farmers' voluntary action, the focus is now on getting to 100 percent through regulation.

Stock exclusion regulations have been drafted and are being consulted on and debated now.

Government's willingness to regulate – not as the first step, but as the last step to complete a successful voluntary process - is another sign of progress.

What we have seen is a national conversation taking place, widespread consciousness-raising, widespread action by farmers, and soon we are likely to have regulation to take care of the remaining gaps – this has been mature behaviour by all parties concerned.

It's a good omen for the ongoing work of continually protecting and upgrading our freshwater resources (there's a lot more work to be done around dams, storage, water allocation, water rights and charging, for example).

Now we have to look to the cities as well as the country.

Poor water quality downstream of several cities and towns is not in keeping with our clean tourism brand.

Stormwater and sewage spillage and pollution caused by aging pipes in urban areas requires action. It needs the same sort of focus that we have seen on the dairy industry.

Improved water management in cities and towns is going to need conversations, consciousness-raising, action and investment.

Just as the costs to farmers of protecting rural waterways are substantial, the costs of upgrading water systems and infrastructure in cities and towns will also be significant.

A public conversation is needed about who will pay for these upgrades and how.

There is a need for local government to be engaging honestly with ratepayers on how an upgrade of water infrastructure can be achieved, and how ratepayers' interests will be best served by the funding methods chosen.

Central government can stand behind this with regulation as a backstop to a voluntary process, just as has happened with dairy.

Central government's proposed regulation-making powers over land use activities in the still-promised Resource Management Act reforms will have a part to play here.

This is a good time to celebrate what has been achieved and plan for the continuing work of protecting and upgrading our vital water resource.

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