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Lawrence Yule: New water structure needed

By Lawrence Yule



The Mayor of Hastings Lawrence Yule.

The Government Inquiry into Havelock North Drinking Water has completed its hearings phase and is about to receive submissions on failings and improvements.

We are fortunate that, due to the work of the science caucus, the inquiry is able to say with a very high degree of probability that the gastro outbreak was caused by contaminated water from a pond in the Mangateretere Stream polluting the aquifer via a previously unknown connection, and being sucked into Brookvale bore 1 during its normal operation.

It seems unlikely that the outbreak was caused by any infrastructure failing.

While it is good to have a clear indication of the cause of last year's gastro outbreak, the Inquiry process has made it very clear that no one in the wider drinking water sector can rest on their laurels.

For us at the Council, the Inquiry has highlighted gaps in our documentation, institutional memory and record-keeping, and shortcomings in some of our contingency planning and compliance documentation.

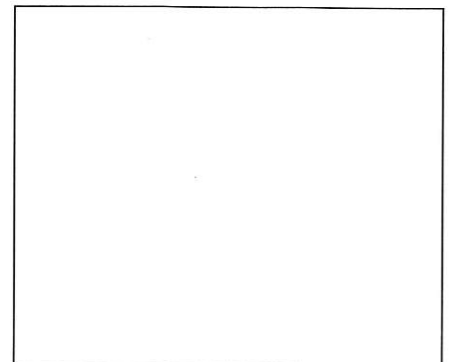
While none of this seems to have made any difference to the cause of the outbreak, and potentially only marginal difference to the response, there are improvements in our processes, preparedness and capability that the council needs to, and will, make.

However, there are two major focus areas that have emerged: firstly, the need for a hard look at treatment options for drinking water, and secondly, the need for greater collaboration between agencies with responsibility for managing drinking water and water resources more broadly.

In Hawke's Bay we have been complacent about the quality of our drinking water. We have taken aquifer water that we all thought to be clean and pristine, and provided it to our citizens without any treatment whatsoever.

The Havelock North contamination event has been a huge "wakeup call" on this approach. The recent scare in the Napier supply further erased complacency. We can no longer treat the Te Mata/Tukituki aquifer as a safe and secure water source.

The GNS Science report on age testing of our source groundwater is pointing to potentially significant changes in the aquifer system and the possible need to treat water from some of our other bores. The Inquiry also seems likely to question the continuation of untreated supplies across the country.



All of this points to the need to discuss water treatment options with our community. While many of our citizens don't like chlorination, this is not the only option. The UV and filtration systems we are installing at Brookvale bore 3, while costly, can guard against contamination to a very high standard.

Another theme emerging from the inquiry is the need for key agencies in the management of drinking water to work more closely together on managing risks. By key agencies I mean those with responsibility for the environment (the Regional Council), health (the District Health Board and drinking water assessors) and water supply (Hastings District Council).

It's become clear that we need to strengthen our processes for working together on issues ranging from groundwater science to catchment management and resource consent applications for activities close to drinking water bores and sources. But there are wider questions as well: what is the relative priority of drinking water compared to other water uses? Are we over-allocating our water resources?

In my view, the inquiry is likely to address inter-agency collaboration. Last week I met with the leaders of the Napier, Central Hawke's Bay and Regional Councils (Wairoa was also invited), the District Health Board and Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated to work to ensure improved management of our water. A joint governance committee has been proposed.

This will build on the existing joint working group established to assist the Government Inquiry.

We need to broaden the conversation about all things water. We manage transport, land use and Civil Defence on a regional basis in collaboration with the Councils involved. I strongly support a proposed structure that could be called WaterHB. This would not control staffing arrangements or asset ownership but would mean that water allocation, water quality, water storage and aquifer management would be done in a collaborative basis agreed by all Councils.

Water is our most precious resource. We need a governance structure that reflects its fundamental importance.

- Lawrence Yule is the Mayor of Hastings.

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5 comments

Every city and town in NZ should have access to unlimited fresh clean water for residential use. Go to the South Is West Coast stand outside when it's raining & you almost drown. Their catchments are brimming to overflowing, transfer & refill reservoirs.

Warwick G - 12:49 PM Wednesday, 15 Feb 2017

Barry Commoner's 4 laws of ecology

- 1) Everything is connected to everything else
- 2) Everything must go somewhere
- 3) Nature knows best
- 4) There is no such thing as a free lunch.

Danny - Hastings - 12:49 PM Wednesday, 15 Feb 2017

The "infrastructure" that failed is that the HDC failed to manage the cleanliness of the city water supply, their single most important responsibility.

All these questions posed by Mr. Yule makes me think nobody knows what the hell they are doing. Are you not paid professionals?

Asking for better "cooperation" between councils is NOT how you design a failsafe system. No mission-critical system should invite failure due to personality conflicts or forgetfulness. Failsafe processes and heavy fines for noncompliance are much more effective.

Paul - Napier - 12:50 PM Wednesday, 15 Feb 2017

No mention of HDC's poor maintenance of the bore heads?! It was pointed out to them in several reports but nothing was done. And they knew about the connection between the pond and the bores since at least 2008, so whichever way the contamination got in HDC have been negligent. Time for Yule to fall on his sword over this: people died and it happened on his watch.

ABS - Hawke's Bay - 12:50 PM Wednesday, 15 Feb 2017

Really?

Tony Cussins, a hydrological engineer, told the inquiry the scientists believed it there was a provisional 75 per cent probability that contaminated water entered the Hastings District Council's Brookvale Road bore No. 1, through defective casing beneath the ground.

WelshJerry - Waiheke Island - 12:50 PM Wednesday, 15 Feb 2017