

# STORMWATER MANAGEMENT IN THE WAIKATO: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

***S.Joyce & A.Rossaak (Morphum Environmental Ltd), E.Lonnberg-Shaw (Enviro Planning), B.Jensen, M.Allfrey & M.Chapman (Te Miro Water Consultants)***

## **ABSTRACT**

(1500 words)

Morphum Environmental, Te Miro Water and EnviroPlanning (the project team) have worked, and are currently working, with Waikato Regional Council (WRC) and the majority of District Councils across the Waikato Region, including Waipā, Hauraki, Ōtorohanga, Matamata-Piako, South Waikato and Waitomo to assist with the renewal of their comprehensive urban stormwater discharge consents (CSDC). The consents have been operating for 20+ years and much has changed in the regulatory space in that time, most recently, the NPS-FM 2020.

Early in the process, it was identified that this was a rare opportunity to use this window to significantly change the approach to stormwater discharge consents across the Waikato region. It was noted that the 20-year-old consent applications provided little to no value and were rarely used, typically gathering dust on a shelf. Given the magnitude of technical assessments, time and costs associated with meeting the regulatory requirements of the CSDC application, the project team focused on how the data, processes and outputs required for the regulatory CSDC application process could be used well beyond the lodgment date, to help District Councils better understand and manage their stormwater networks effectively and efficiently.

This change in approach required buy-in from the District Councils, but equally it required an open mind from WRC to see the potentially considerable long-term value for the District Councils as well as the Waikato region. Fortunately, the WRC have brought a pragmatic approach to this application and have been open to discussions and debate around what changes can be made, while still ensuring compliance with the RMA requirements.

Changes proposed by the project team that differed from the previous discharge consents were:

- A focus on the implementation and management of existing and future stormwater services, as well as a pragmatic monitoring plan including the provision for mana whenua value assessments, rather than the onerous and often useful monitoring and reporting approach adopted in past consents.
- Utilising GIS tools such as StoryMaps to reduce reporting requirements, ensure easily accessible detailed data, and provide easy to interpret stormwater management solutions.
- Stronger focus on iwi engagement during the consenting process.

- Development of a stormwater network management plan to assist Council in the ongoing communication and management of their network.

Unlike the existing consents, the renewed consents are required to place a greater emphasis on implementation, to provide tangible solutions to improve stormwater management and discharge quality. The key to successfully managing the effects of urban stormwater going forward is to have a plan for when, what, how and where to implement mitigation or enhancement opportunities. A prioritised implementation plan to assist with District Council's master planning and Long-Term Planning budgets over the period of the consent was developed.

Historically, the monitoring of these consents has been reactive as opposed to proactive due mainly to a lack of resources, with evidence of compliance presented in an Annual Report. The preparation of these reports often befalls a small number of District compliance officers, who are tasked with collating a great amount of information and evidence to support consent condition compliance across an entire urban area – no small feat. Given the growth and urban sprawl of many of these smaller councils over the last 5-10 years, this compliance task is becoming ever-more arduous.

To simplify this process and add resilience, the project team has worked with the District Councils as well as Waikato Regional Council to develop a suite of GIS tools and processes to analyse and hold all the comprehensive consent data. This innovative way of approaching complex consents (applied across 28 towns and 15+ consents so far) puts the power back into the hands of the compliance officers and provides a visual and easy-to-navigate database for relevant consent and compliance information.

The GIS tools form the basis of a consistent and aligned approach to stormwater management across the Waikato region, with significant efficiencies found as neighbouring Councils align processes and share resources. The tools allow for easy identification of catchments at risk, the causes of the risk as well as enhancement and betterment opportunities.

In addition, the tools allow Councils to present a cohesive application to Waikato Regional Council with all relevant information kept in one place and navigated through visual aids. This provides benefit to WRC when it comes to reviewing the CSDC renewal applications, and subsequent Annual Reports, where data and reporting is completed in a consistent manner and throughout the year (as opposed to only at annual reporting time). The online platforms have significantly reduced the necessity for excessively large reports, replacing them with concise technical documents supported by engaging and interactive StoryMaps.

A further key change was a significantly increased focus on iwi engagement. The project team focused on incorporating high cultural values and opportunities for indigenous storytelling and adopting te ao Māori (a Māori worldview) interwoven with what the science is telling us. Driving these works is an obligation to advance the objectives of Te Ture Whaimana o te Awa o Waikato or the Vision and Strategy for the Waikato and Waipā Rivers, as well as Te Tiriti o Waitangi requirements and other policy and legislation.

Iwi engagement typically consisted of kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) communication/hui, sharing of technical reporting and data, and listening to the wishes of mana whenua to be able to incorporate themes or specific recommendations into the CSDC process and eventual consent conditions. The online GIS platform also provided an efficient and engaging instrument for effective iwi, stakeholder and community consultation. With

the use of multiple layers and other interactive features, GIS allows all parties to provide direct input into the process in a smart and valuable way.

Iwi engagement however did not come without its challenges. Particularly as other pressing priorities, such as treaty settlements, often took precedence. In all cases to date, not all relevant iwi have been able to engage fully as a result of these competing interests. A key learning throughout the engagement process is to start engaging with iwi from the outset and provide a pathway for compensation in the same way as other experts are remunerated for their time. We have found Iwi prefer to be on the journey throughout the project, rather than seen as a tick-box exercise once all data is available and decisions are made. Additionally, relationship building is key to successful engagement. We have found Iwi often do not pass on their mātauranga (knowledge) freely and want to ensure there is a base relationship that can be built on to ensure we are a kaitiaki (guardian) for this. In most instances, consultants can assist in commencing the journey to bridging the gap between Council and iwi, but ultimately this is a journey that requires personal input from individuals at Council in order to be successful long-term.

With the CSDC application process, application dates are fixed due to the requirements of the RMA and to safeguard the Councils against enforcement proceedings. However, this does not mean that iwi engagement stops as soon as the applications are lodged. Partnership with mana whenua is required throughout all aspects of, in this case, stormwater management. Therefore, there is an onerous on Councils to ensure the communication continues past the CSDC application and throughout the life of the consent. Additionally, consent conditions can help ensure that iwi recommendations are implemented in the long term, such as through the provision of a cultural monitoring plan and regularly updated implementation plans, which collectively may aid in providing confidence that continued decision-making by mana whenua will endure beyond the granting of the comprehensive consents.

Lastly the consenting process identified the need for each Council to develop a stormwater network management plan. This plan was developed in collaboration with Council teams to help each District understand their gaps in knowledge, communication and understanding of their individual networks. These plans, which sit beside the GIS workspaces, provide a road map for the management of the stormwater network in the future, providing Council teams with clear understanding of ownership and communication processes.

The team is excited to share their learnings from establishing the tool with the wider industry, looking at where the change in approach has been successful such as the development of a centralised data portal allowing stakeholders access to a rich information source. We will also share the lessons learnt, including the potential for over reliance on technology when face-to-face engagement provides invaluable benefits.

## **KEYWORDS**

**Stormwater; Comprehensive Stormwater Discharge Consent; GIS; Waikato; Engagement;**