

Horizons Regional Council

MEDIA RELEASE

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Horizons' One Plan implementation review process

Despite improving water quality in much of the Manawatu-Wanganui Region and maximum effort by Horizons' farmers and territorial authorities in reducing impacts on waterways, the Environmental Defence Society and Wellington Fish and Game's intend to lodge declaration proceedings against Horizons Regional Council in the Environment Court this week.

The declaration focus is on the implementation of rules that reduce leaching of nutrients from farms. The two organisations are seeking clarification around assessments of consent applications under the intensive land use rules of Horizons' One Plan.

Horizons chairman Bruce Gordon says no regulatory plan has ever been applied at the scale of the One Plan in New Zealand before.

"It is hugely disappointing that despite obvious progress being made by Horizons and its communities, that a fishing and hunting group and a small environmental group based in Auckland are willing to enter an expensive court proceeding on what appears to be related to Resource Management Act process rather than outcomes in our local waterways," says Mr Gordon.

"At its implementation in 2014, Horizons' One Plan looked to improve water quality through a number of means including resource consents for discharges to land and water through to non-regulatory means such as the Sustainable Land Use initiative, and the Manawatu River Leaders' and Horowhenua Lake Accord.

"The Plan's implementation is complex and has required cooperation from many organisations to make rules and policies take effect.

"Like any new piece of regulation, the One Plan is continuously monitored and evaluated to allow our Council to learn and refine its delivery."

Horizons strategy and regulation manager Dr Nic Peet says a specific section of the One Plan focuses on limiting the amount of nutrients entering rivers from intensive agriculture in certain catchments around the Region.

"The reason for doing this is to reduce the growth of algae in the rivers. Too much algae can affect a river's ecology," says Dr Peet.

"One of the ways the Plan looks to control nutrients entering waterways is by controlling the amount of nutrient an individual farm is allowed to loose into the soil through resource consents.

“Every nutrient management consent granted is subject to an annual monitoring programme. This involves council staff visiting farms and assessing nutrient budgets to make sure farmers are on track with the targets set out in their consent.

“There is also a five-yearly consent review process which allows Council to revisit consent conditions across a catchment if the measures in place are not having the desired effect.

“The primary sector has embraced the need to do this and industries have taken an active part in the Plan’s implementation. As a regulator, Horizons has welcomed the involvement of industry while maintaining its independence.

Horizons natural resources and partnership manager Dr Roygard says that the 168 consents granted to date for existing farms in target catchments cover nearly 33,000 ha (about 20 per cent of the entire dairying area in the Region).

“The existing dairy farms consented have made significant reductions in the leaching of nitrogen at an average of nine per cent,” says Dr Roygard.

“This equates to approximately 100 tonnes (100,000 kg) of nitrogen reduction overall. This is about the same amount nitrogen that was removed from the Manawatu River in the transition from having 347 dairy shed discharges into the Manawatu River in 1997 to having no consented dairy shed effluent discharges to the Manawatu in 2012.

“If the remaining One Plan consents to be granted continue at a similar average reduction rate, the overall reduction via implementation of the Plan on existing farms is likely to be well in excess of 200 tonnes of nitrogen once all of the estimated 400 consents for existing dairy farms are processed.”

“It is also important to note that upgrades to wastewater treatment plants, stream fencing, riparian planting, and a range of other measures also have an important part to play in improving water quality,” says Dr Roygard.

"Around the time the One Plan was notified the Council upgraded its water quality monitoring programmes by nearly doubling the amount of water quality monitoring it undertakes. Horizons now monitors 138 sites each month. This is one of the largest monitoring programmes in New Zealand."

At their October 2015 council meeting, Horizons councillors reconfirmed their approach to the implementation of One Plan nutrient management provisions. Stakeholders have also been engaged as part of a nine-month piece of work to evaluate the Plan’s effectiveness.

“As a result of Council’s own evaluation review involving key stakeholders due at the end of the year and the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management, Council will decide whether it needs to change the Plan or its implementation,” says Mr Gordon.

“We have always had an open door policy for anyone who may have concerns. It’s unfortunate that EDS and Fish and Game have not chosen to utilise this process.

“One Plan regulations are extensive and detailed, Horizons prefers to work with all of our stakeholders to ensure that collectively we are working towards sustainable solutions for the long-term.

“It’s not a box ticking exercise, it’s about proper nutrient management to ensure the best possible outcomes for both our rural community and our Region’s water quality. While the court proceedings are a distraction, we hope that it will add valuable data to our ongoing review of the Plan rather than an unnecessary cost of up to half a million dollars at the expense of our ratepayers.”

Until any decision by Horizons to do otherwise, Horizons will continue to process consents. Farmers who have any questions or concerns are advised to contact Horizons directly.

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