

Aggregate aggravation is enough to give industry a gravel rash

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James Boyce is a lobbyist facing a big challenge - he needs to make gravel politically sexy.

And Mr Boyce - president of the Aggregate and Quarry Association - plans to also change public perceptions of quarries as dirty and noisy, with the argument they are a beneficial form of "longterm landscaping".

His association today mounted a campaign for political commitment to longterm planning of aggregate mining.

"There isn't a national strategy for where our future supplies of aggregate are going to come from," said Mr Boyce, who is operations manager at Holcim's Bombay Quarry south of Auckland.

"If society is expecting growth, then we have to have access to raw materials".

Central government had essentially washed its hands of considering aggregates as a material of national importance, and left it up to local councils, which were reluctant to plan longterm.

The association was calling for a national infrastructure summit to address resource issues, with appointment of a minister responsible for aggregate mining -- perhaps a Minister for Infrastructure -- with an advisory body drawing on the industry.

And his industry wants a national policy statement on aggregate supply -- a powerful tool under the Resource Management Act -- which would enable the Government to set standards for regional councils to meet in longterm planning for "local" aggregate supplies.

Every local authority should have to identify and designate "resource extraction zones", with quarry operators given a say in regional longterm planning for rock and gravel mining.

The association will stage its 40th annual conference in Auckland next week, starting on July 9, and delegates will only have to look out the window to see their dilemma.

Though the public doesn't think about shortages of alluvial gravels, crushed rock and other aggregates, sources in the Auckland region have become so scarce there have been proposals to bring aggregate in from the north of the South Island for construction of roads and buildings.

Already, Auckland was reliant on aggregate trucked in from Northland and Waikato for about 25 percent of its supply.

Auckland's best rock sources were old lava flows but many of the city's 50 volcanic cones had already been quarried and the rest were now protected. It was 10 years since any new resource consents were given for quarries around Auckland.

The crisis was predicted a decade ago by GNS Science, in a paper, New Zealand's Industrial Mineral Potential, as Auckland's population was predicted to soar by 40 percent from 1.11 million in 1996 to a predicted 1.56 million by 2021.

Nationally, less than 14 million tonnes of aggregate was mined in 1991: 4 tonnes per person. Now about 50 million tonnes are produced -- about 11 tonnes for every New Zealander.

As recently as 2006 this level of consumption was predicted to still be 15 years away.

Mr Boyce said the lack of planning for extraction of aggregates was a national problem, and had taken on new urgency with concerns over rising fuel prices and the cost of the nation's carbon footprint.

The cost of aggregate doubles for every 30km it has to be trucked from a quarry to a building site: the relatively low total value per tonne makes transport costs a major factor in the economics of supply.

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