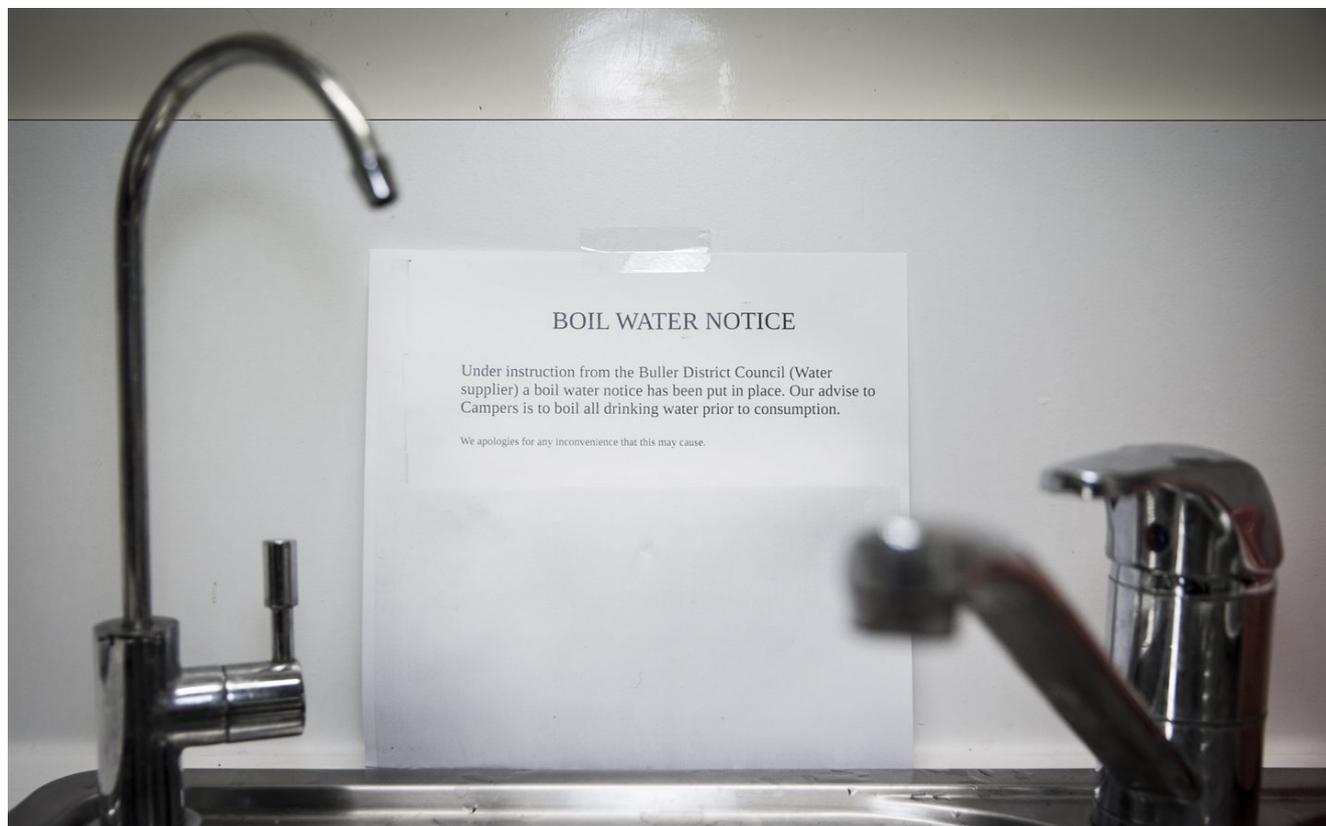




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Insight: How Safe is Your Drinking Water?



From [Insight \(/national/programmes/insight\)](#), 8:09 am on 20 August 2017



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[subject=Insight:%20How%20Safe%20is%20Your%20Drinking%20Water?](#)

Safe, clean drinking water is essential to public health and a core service of local authorities, but not all parts of New Zealand enjoy the luxury of being certain their water won't make them sick.

Half a million visitors travel to the West Coast town of Punakaiki every year to experience the natural wonder of the Pancake Rocks. Many are tourists in camper vans, who park up for the night in the local motor camp where they can shower, cook and fill up their water tanks for the next couple of days' freedom camping.

For about the last four or five years however, drinking water supplies at the camp have been on a boil water notice more often than not.

The Pancake Rocks at Punakaiki on the West Coast attract up to half a million visitors a year Photo: (RNZ / Philippa Tolley)



Punakaiki Beach Camp is run by Craig Finlay, who has lived in the township with his family for 27 years, and he is passionate about the special, beautiful part of the coast he lives on. Part of the Paparoa National Park are the dramatic limestone cliffs, a bushline that drops from the mountains to the sea and one of New Zealand's tourism icons, the Pancake Rocks and its dramatic blowholes.

He is less than happy about the state of water supplies that leave him running around the campsite, putting up notices warning those staying that the water might be unsafe and that they need to boil it.

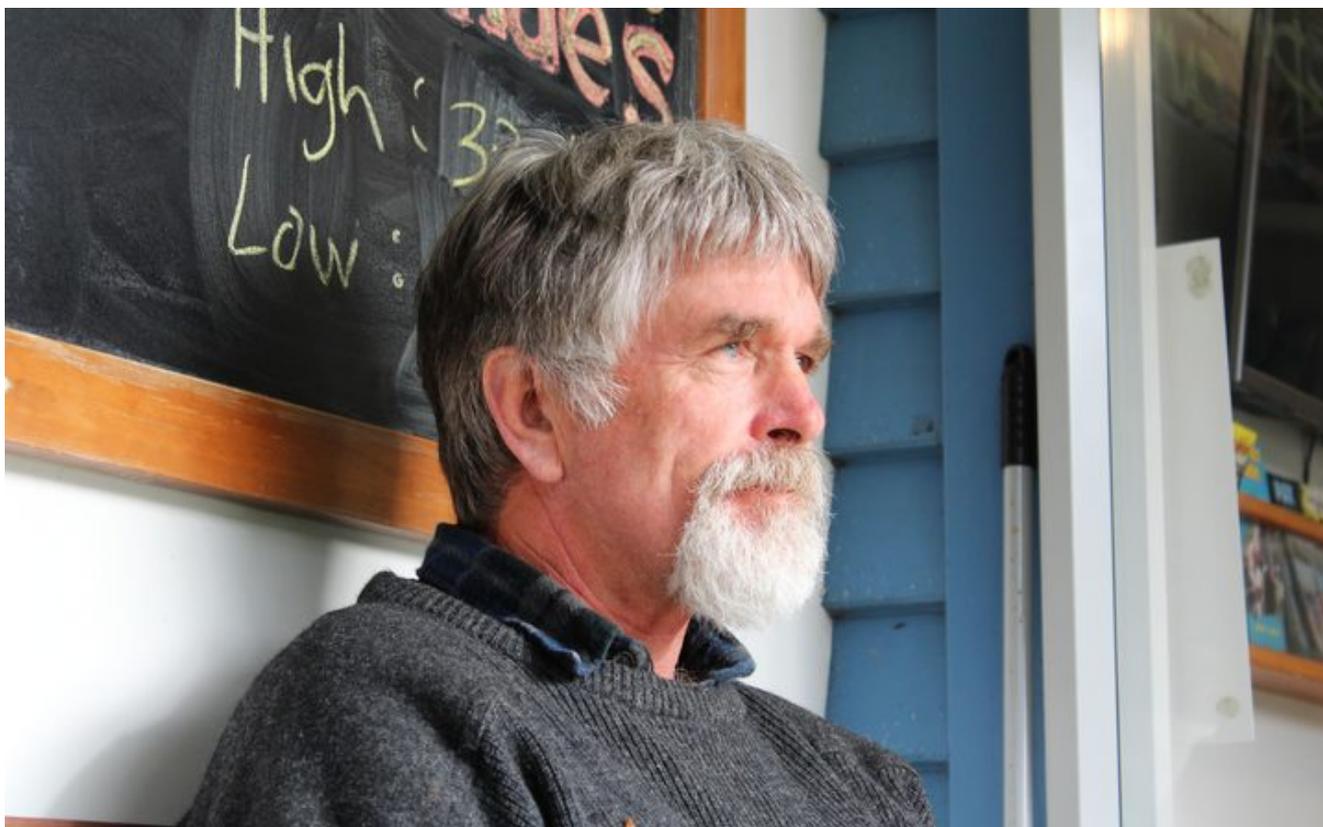
"We have about 50 water sources people can tap into and can't physically get signs everywhere ... so we do have signs in prominent places, and to be honest they're only in English so when 90% of the people are foreign tourists maybe not all of them can read it."

Craig Finlay runs Punakaiki Beach Camp with his wife. Photo: (RNZ / Philippa Tolley)

Mr Finlay argues the area is a drawcard for New Zealand tourism and he wants central government to take responsibility.

"A boil water notice conjures up all sorts of thoughts in tourists' eyes ... it almost creates an image of 'third world' when we are trying to promote it as clean and green," he said.

How seriously things can go wrong was brought into sharp relief with the Havelock North campylobacter outbreak. About 5500 people out of the town's roughly 14,000 were infected last August (<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/312100/gastro->



bug-hit-5000-in-havelock-north). The illness was bad enough that 45 went into hospital and it is thought to have contributed to three deaths.

An official inquiry ensued, reporting in its first stage (<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/330484/govt-warns-all-councils-over-drinking-water>) that an unknown number of residents continued to suffer health complications (<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/324149/large-number-of-elderly-never-recovered-from-gastro-outbreak-dhb>).

Those findings are backed up by Carol Winters, who manages the Havelock North branch of Age Concern.

Carol Winters of Age Concern Havelock North says so many people she works with are still suffering after the contaminated water crisis. Photo: (RNZ /Jemma Brackebush)

"People took months to recover. I have one couple, the husband has water around the heart ... directly related to the illness."

"Financially, people have taken a while to get back on their feet and some people still haven't ... there is reactive arthritis in people who didn't have arthritis before and they are now arthritic and that is directly linked to the campylobacter."

The next stage of the inquiry is looking at the difficulties in providing safe water and making recommendations about doing that better. It is due to deliver its next report in early December (<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/extension-report-back-date-havelock-north-drinking-water-inquiry>).



Water New Zealand is an umbrella group that focuses on sustainable management and has been advocating for universal treatment of all drinking water supplies. Several water supplies around the country remain untreated, including in Canterbury, which is drawn from underground aquifers.

Its chief executive John Pfahlert says a whole series of changes are needed if people throughout New Zealand are going to be able to rely on the safety of their water.

"There are problems to do with the leadership, or not, the Ministry of Health has taken in the last 10 years."

Head of Water New Zealand, John Pfahlert, wants better water standards and stronger leadership from the Ministry of Health Photo: (RNZ / Philippa Tolley)

"There are issues in the format of the drinking water standards themselves, problems with industry training, an absence of qualifications for people who run treatment plants and no continuing professional development. Almost everywhere you look there are issues associated with the way we are managing drinking water in this country," he said.

Mr Pfahlert is quick to highlight that many local authorities handle water supplies very well, but he also points to the Ministry of Health's Annual Drinking Water Survey (<http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/annual-report-drinking-water-quality-2015-2016>) as an indication of how much room for improvement there is.

While the summary speaks of improvements, details within the report show more than 80,000 people are receiving publicly supplied water that has failed bacteria standards



(<http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/337490/nz-s-drinking-water-compliance-totally-inadequate-water-nz>). More than 600,000 people received water that failed standards for gastroenteritis-causing protozoa, such as giardia or cryptosporidium. Some people received water through their taps that have failed both standards.

Failures to test, as set out in the regulations was to blame for many local authorities failing the standards. But 32 areas nationwide are listed as having too many tests showing excessive E coli.

Waimangaroa resident John Buchanan is angry he is paying the same rates when his water has been on a boil notice for 4 years. Photo: (RNZ / Philippa Tolley)

Many people who are on boil water notices don't take any special precautions, but use their water as if it was safe. One of those is John Buchanan who lives in the tiny West Coast settlement of Waimangaroa. The community of about 100 houses have been on a 'boil water notice' for four years after a slip damaged the water intake.

Mr Buchanan retired there, and describes the situation as unacceptable and questions whether he should be paying rates for drinking water when it isn't fit for purpose.

Buller District mayor Garry Howard says the situation in Waimangaroa is typical of the funding challenges local authorities face in providing safe, clean drinking water when significant new equipment such as a treatment plant and setting up an alternative, safer sources of water are needed.

At the annual local government forum recently, Mr Howard said he listened to about 30



speakers and every single one mentioned water and climate change.



Councils just have to find a way to pay for the work to provide clean drinking water according to Buller District Mayor, Garry Howard. Photo: (RNZ / Philippa Tolley)

More extreme weather events such as heavy rain and flooding will only put more pressure on aging systems that may need replacing, as is the case in like Waimangaroa where a slip destroyed the water inlet, he said.

Along with the final stage in the Havelock North water crisis inquiry, two other top-level investigations into water supplies are under way.

Local Government Minister Anne Tolley launched a ministerial review last month into drinking, storm and waste water. It referred to system-wide performance problems, and said its findings could provide a basis for ambitious reform.

Water supplies, including drinking water, are also the focus of the office of the Auditor-General for the year ahead.

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