

CENTRAL LEADERSHIP

Policy

The New Zealand Water and Wastes Association (NZWWA) believes that there is a need for greater central leadership on water policy as the current, fragmented situation is not conducive to the long-term sustainable management of New Zealand's fresh water. Greater direction and leadership and clearer regulatory frameworks would create a more unified approach amongst the varied and multifarious players within the field of water management. Consistency is vital for the sustainable usage and affordable access of water for domestic, industrial, agricultural, recreational, and cultural purposes as well as for environmentally sound treatment and disposal practices and the maintenance of waterways.

Explanation

Within the current New Zealand system, water policy is spread across a number of central government departments, including, but not limited to: the Ministry for the Environment, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Ministry for Economic Development, Treasury, and the Department of Building and Housing and the Ministry of Social Development.

Attempts at departmental level for a "whole of government" approach to water policy have not been productive, and recent moves utilising regulations under the Resources Management Act (RMA) risk further regulatory layers being imposed without clear national direction. At the local and regional level 73 separate entities are responsible for three waters infrastructure and land-use planning and development and another 12 are responsible for, among other matters, flood management and water quality. Fragmentation such as this is not conducive to the effective and integrated management of such a crucial resource.

This structural arrangement has resulted in inconsistency in local management practices, widely differing costs for many water users, variable compliance requirements and continuing regional differences in RMA implementation practice. In addition, the multiplicity of water entities has led to both duplication and increasingly serious capacity issues, particularly for smaller utilities.

There are several alternative models currently operating elsewhere. One example is the model used in Melbourne, Australia. With a population similar to that of New Zealand's, one entity, Melbourne Water, owned by the Victorian Government, which acts as a wholesaler to three retail companies. Additionally Melbourne Water is responsible for the oversight of such matters as major drainage systems, waterways and floodplain management. While water management has been centralised, local perspectives and political structures are maintained through 30 councils and shires.

A robustly designed, centralised model would foster a more unified approach and result in better and more sustainable management of this vital resource.

New Zealand is one of the few western countries that does not employ a central agency for water. The ideal outcome for New Zealand would be the establishment of a designated water agency that would assume all current regulatory responsibilities for water, be the conduit for all Government assistance programmes for water, including but not limited to freshwater, wastewater, stormwater, irrigation, and water collection, storage or reuse, and be directly responsible for the administration and implementation of the Health (Drinking Water) Amendment Act 2007. The

department would also be responsible for investigating institutional reform of current water management structures, improvements on flood risk management plans and the establishment of alternative allocation approaches.

A stronger national perspective would encourage a situation of systemised commonality of approach amongst public services, private interests and the general public on water issues. This projected consistency would, in turn, assist in creating a more favourable environment in which to introduce informed debate on much needed infrastructural reforms.

A greater focus on national leadership will assist in raising the awareness of the value of water and the critical role it plays in our society and economy.