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Hawke's Bay
TODAY

Inquiry drills into Hastings council's water procedures

By Nicki Harper



Hastings District Councils' processes were under the spotlight at the second day of the inquiry into the contamination of Havelock North's water.

The spotlight was on the Hastings District Council's communications, processes and procedures around drinking water during the second day of the Government inquiry into last August's campylobacter outbreak in Havelock North.

The inquiry is seeking to uncover how the water contamination, most likely from sheep faeces, happened and yesterday Hastings District Council water supply manager Dylan Stuijt took the stand to give evidence.

He was asked about the council's drinking water safety plan, and its response to questions from the Drinking Water Assessor (DWA), starting in 2010, about raising the boreheads at Brookvale Rd (a method that would enable gravity to prevent possibly contaminated water entering the bore).

Counsel assisting the inquiry Nathan Gedye drew attention to the fact that having not received a satisfactory response, the DWA asked about this again in 2011.

"Were you not concerned that the DWA had asked twice?"

Mr Stuijt said he was comfortable with how the boreheads at Brookvale were operating and with the earthworks around them - the sump pumps and float alarms were in operation and such a system had been found to be suitable for use in Napier and other parts of Hastings.

Mr Gedye said there was no official correspondence from Hastings to say that raising the boreheads was not necessary, and such a lack of documentation was a common theme over the years.

There was also discussion about how internal council staff interacted in the face of strong recommendations from the DWA about the water safety plan.

Panel chairman Lyn Stevens said communication appeared informal and unstructured, and Mr Stuijt agreed in hindsight that it was not satisfactory.

Over a number of years the DWA was in correspondence with the Hastings District Council over the water safety plan.

Mr Gedye challenged Mr Stuijt about the fact that despite calls for Hastings to have an updated plan, which began in October 2014, the documents were not produced until January 2015.

Mr Stuijt said that at the time most correspondence came through electronically, but for a time some of these documents were delivered in paper form and got missed. He assured the panel that now all correspondence was electronic.

Acting for the Hastings District Council, barrister Matthew Casey also discussed non-conformances as raised by the DWA about the water safety plan and suggested that these could arise from ambiguities in reports, and that they were often easily dealt with, so compliance was reached soon after.

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Mr Stuijt agreed that non-conformances could come up even when staff thought matters were compliant - and that they could be worked through and often solved quite easily.

In discussions over continued E-coli and campylobacter transgressions over the years, Mr Stevens suggested that every time there was a transgression the mindset at Hastings District Council was to try to explain it away, however Mr Stuijt said it wasn't that simple.

"We investigate and try to get to the bottom of these things - we think we have found the cause and then out of the blue something else comes up again."

Near the end of the afternoon panel member and Wellington City Council engineer Anthony Wilson asked if the Hastings District Council had ever been advised that having a non-chlorinated water supply was a substantial health risk.

"The Local Government Act obliges council to consult with the community through the Long Term Plan on its level of service.

"I would have thought an unchlorinated supply, which creates a risk, would be in the plan but it's not happened for at least a decade."

Mr Stuijt said he believed there was a paper put forward on the chlorination issue a number of years ago, and said that it would be worth giving every new incoming council this information.

The inquiry continues at the Hastings District Court today.

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