

Political parties talk water

The future of the country's water is a concern from many angles. Just weeks away from polling day, Water New Zealand asks the major political parties four key questions about how they will tackle critical water issues.

1 What changes are needed in the management of fresh water to ensure its long-term sustainability and ensure that all New Zealanders have fair and equitable access to it?

ACT

Economically efficient use of water will result if we price water and allow it to be tradeable. Given that water is part of a natural system of evaporation, condensation and flow, revenues from the pricing of water should be owned in common, as revenues to local and central government. Those revenues should in the first instance be used to fund the monitoring, consultation, enforcement, scientific research, and environmental work focused on fixing degraded water quality.

Green Party

There are lots of ways in which we can manage fresh water to ensure its long-term sustainability. We can start by ending the millions of dollars that go to large-scale irrigation schemes like Ruataniwha and Wairarapa, that will enable dairy farming and push our rivers and aquifers to the limit. Irrigation schemes are not silver bullets to provide secure water into the future, they overlook the need to build resilience to climate instability and farm with the environment, not against it. We also need to look at how we're treating our aquifers that provide drinking water for large parts of New Zealand. Water bottlers and exporters are able to take pristine water from deep aquifers, while our towns rely on shallow aquifers that as we've seen in Havelock North and other parts of the country, do not always supply the best water to people.

Labour

We must make our rivers and lakes clean enough for people to swim in during summer without getting sick, while also achieving aquatic ecosystem health. Labour will do this through a new Freshwater Management National Policy Statement [NPS] based on that recommended by former chief Environment Court Judge Sheppard in 2010, but spiked by National. Increases in livestock land use intensity will no longer be a permitted activity. This is needed to stop rivers and lakes getting dirtier. The NPS, along with stronger water quality

standards, will mean that within five years water quality should be improving. Even the most grossly polluted rivers and lakes must be cleaned up over a generation. This will also protect aquifers.

Maori Party

Better management of our freshwater resource is vital to its long-term sustainability which is why we advocate for Te Mana o Te Wai (the health and well-being of water) to be at the heart of all decisions.

Water, the health of the environment and its people are interlinked and only by recognising this can we improve the mauri (quality and vitality) of water and safeguard the resource for future generations.

National

The Government has made a major step forward in freshwater management with the first National Policy Statement. Its implementation by Regional Councils is progressing with limits being set on contaminants and water takes. Our top priority is seeing this policy implemented nationwide.

New Zealand First

The current National Policy Statement on Renewable Electricity Generation and the National Policy Statement on Freshwater Management must be reviewed.

The government must ensure that only the sustainable taking and use of water for commercial purposes is permitted by developing a national water use strategy.

Legislation must ensure that the granting of RMA consents is consistent with the proposed new National Policy Statement and the Strategy.

The Opportunities Party

Water quality is under threat in many areas, while the demand for clean water is rising. We need to guarantee the public's right to clean fresh water while making the most of this incredible asset. The way to do that is by making polluters and commercial water users pay, and use that revenue to ensure water quality is restored.

United Future

We need to keep our fresh water of high quality and available for future generations.

At the very least, there needs to be a coherent royalties regime put in place, like there is for oil and gas. That way we can ensure that our water resources are not being just given away.

Secondly, there also needs to be a clear national policy developed about water exports. For too long there has been a complacency that water will always be abundant in New Zealand, and while that is generally true, recent developments show we can no longer take it for granted. Dirty and dried up rivers, and contaminated aquifers are not what we have usually been used to, nor do we want them to become the norm. Especially, if at the same time, we have to sit and watch the ships sailing away with millions of litres of our pure water for which they have paid virtually nothing.

2 The issue of water pricing has become relevant given the public concern around the bottling and selling of water for profit. What policy changes, if any, need to be put in place to ensure fairness when water is taken and used for profit?

ACT

Introducing tradeable water rights will help ensure water is allocated to highest-value uses.

Green Party

If you take water and profit from it, you should pay for it, just as you do any other input. We've been calling for a price on the commercial use of water for some time now, and what's clear is that it's a complex issue that we need to talk about as a nation. We'll be making policy announcements this year on it, so watch this space.

Labour

Labour says that everyone owns water, although some people have particular interests that others don't. Some of those are now valuable. We say that when a community resource such as this is being used for commercial profit, it is fair that the public gets a return on it by way of a royalty – as we do for oil, gas, coal, and even gravel.

All domestic and municipal uses of water would be exempt from the royalty, as would stock water uses. Royalty revenue would be shared with local councils and iwi.

Maori Party

The current system is not fair, or for that matter, clear. A discussion needs to be had around charging a fair rate for the bottling and selling of water but it needs to be guided by the principles of Te Mana o Te Wai.

It is not right that households are charged more to access a water supply than companies are who make a substantial profit from the allocation of water rights. We want water exports by foreign companies suspended so issues around water, namely quality, management and ownership, can be addressed.

National

The issue of water pricing needs to be considered with care and sophistication. Bottled water is such a small fraction of takes (0.002 percent) that a knee jerk response could derail sensible policy for key sectors like dairy, horticulture and wider industry. The Government has established a high powered technical advisory group that is carefully working through the issues and will report later this year. It will help inform future policy.

New Zealand First

Water must not be taxed or subjected to any charge beyond the recovery of capital, and the operational costs (including a fair rate of return) of taking, storing and reticulating it for authorised uses.

Where fresh water is exported from New Zealand in a purely or substantially natural state (such as bottled water), a royalty will be charged on a volume exported basis, and at least 25 percent of the royalties collected will be returned annually to the territorial local authority or authorities from which the water is sourced, for use exclusively for local economic development purposes. The amount of the royalty will be determined from time to time in consultation with the local authorities where water for export is sourced.

If a water consent holder finds they do not need all the water they applied to use, or they do not build as much irrigation infrastructure as planned, it should not be transferred.

The Opportunities Party

All commercial water users should be charged for the water that they use. The ideal outcome is that local authorities should identify how much spare capacity there is and auction off temporary permits to the highest bidders. This needs to be accompanied by charges for water pollution to ensure the water is truly used in a way that makes us all better off.

United Future

The job of Government is to safeguard and manage the resources of our country for all New Zealanders. As per our answer to question one, we would like to see a coherent royalties regime put in place that would attach a price to water when it is taken. There likely needs to be a wider political conversation on the most efficient way to regulate this natural resource and ensure that our water is future proofed for the country we will leave to our children and our children's children.

3 Is it now time to talk about ownership and pricing issues?

ACT

Yes. We fixed over-exploitation of our fisheries by leading the world with a system of tradeable quota and science based quota management. We can do the same with freshwater and water quality, by pricing water and allowing the use rights to be traded, all supported by a strong science research base to ensure we do not over-allocate water, while repairing the environmental damage already done to our rivers and lakes.

Green Party

Absolutely. The thinking so far has been that water is infinite and free, but we're getting situations like the Waikirikiri/Selwyn River that ran dry this year and still has minimal water in it. In terms of ownership, we need to talk about who has responsibility for the care of our water rather than who owns it.

Labour

Yes. See Answer 2.

Maori Party

Yes. Current water allocation arrangements, which effectively allow water to be used to generate a profit, is a form of ownership despite the Government saying that no one owns the water.

Any national discussion on water ownership must consider the rights of iwi under the Treaty of Waitangi and we support their endeavours to further their rights.

Companies that profit from effectively a free resource should protect and preserve that water source or risk a substantial financial penalty and if the water quality declines they must restore it to an acceptable state.

National

The issues of pricing and ownership of water are hugely complex. Market models have a mixed track record internationally. They may be an appropriate solution in areas facing significant shortages but for most parts of New Zealand, only a fraction of the water resource is used. Any reforms need to be progressed cautiously and be based on science.

New Zealand First

Water is a common good and cannot be owned by any person or by the crown.

Maori rights and interests: The Treaty of Waitangi does not confer rights to take or use fresh water upon Maori, which are greater or lesser than the rights of any other New Zealander.

Crown Entity to hold all water storage in trust: All water storage facilities used for the purpose of hydro-electricity generation and/or agricultural irrigation held in any man-made storage reservoir, or in any lake or river consented for those purposes under the RMA, currently owned or held by any State Owned Enterprise, other Crown entity, or any local authority, will be transferred to a new Crown entity to be held permanently upon trust for the people of New Zealand. The new entity will allocate and license all water storage resources for hydro-electric power generation and agricultural irrigation and any other commercial use in accordance with the Strategy.

The Opportunities Party

Yes, and as part of that Maori ownership rights over freshwater need to be recognised and resolved. This issue is too big to hospital pass to local government to resolve, we need a national settlement.

4 New Zealand's three waters (drinking, storm and wastewater) are under increasing pressure due to declining quality, climate changes and population growth. How should much-needed long-term investment in infrastructure be tackled?

ACT

We believe local councils should receive half the GST from building in their area, for use on infrastructure. This means March's \$2 billion in new consents would signal an extra \$150 million investment in vital local infrastructure, such as drinking, storm and wastewater – all of which are desperately needed with population increases.

Green Party

We need to take a long view, not a short term view as this government has done. The protection of public drinking water is a serious national issue and it may need central government support to ensure a clean supply for some communities, as well as changes to land uses, especially when water comes from unconfined aquifers.

Catherine Delahunty has a bill in the Members Ballot addressing how we can protect our aquifers by giving them the same status in law as other water bodies. We could also support drinking water from small home tanks and water reuse systems. We are wasting a lot of water we could reuse. Water conservation plans need to be developed for all communities. There is best practice in stormwater and wastewater in different places but no national leadership to ensure it's shared, either a university or an MFE unit could gather and promote the best practice options, as wastewater contains emerging contaminants which require very specific wetland plants to assist in decontamination. The public need education about what products are actually unsafe in wastewater and some products should have toxic ingredients removed from them. This should be carried out by the EPA but it's seen as too expensive to reassess them.

Labour

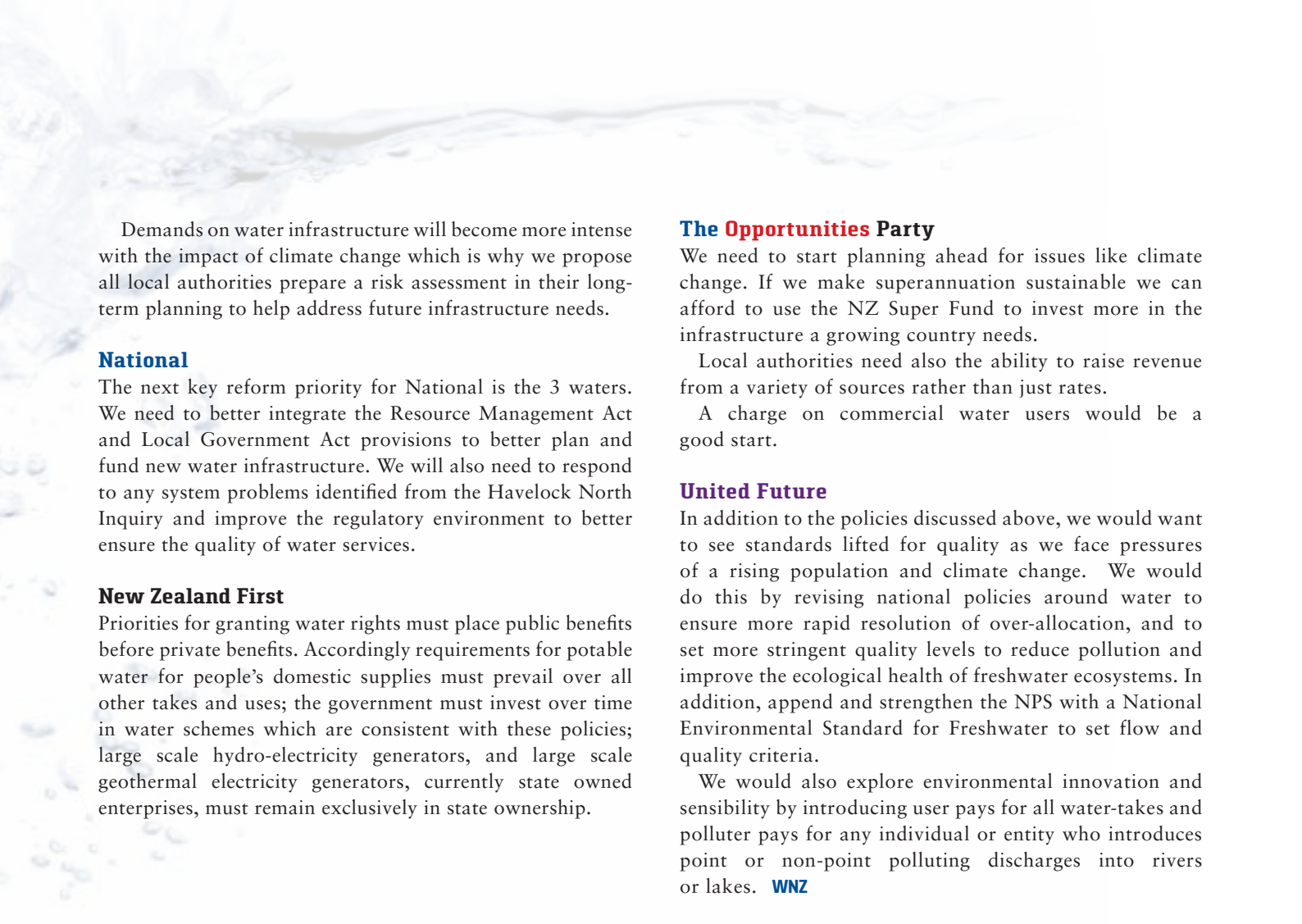
Sewage treatment has improved enormously over recent decades in most of our cities, but some have not completed the separation of their stormwater from sewage. Labour will work with Auckland and other cities to agree timeframes for completion of this separation.

Labour will investigate the adequacy of urban sewage treatment plants across smaller urban areas to identify towns that may need assistance with planning or implementing cost-effective upgrades.

Meeting minimum drinking water standards is a core responsibility of local authorities. It can sometimes be a challenge for smaller communities, and Labour will assist them as we did when last in government.

Maori Party

Large scale investment, particularly in rural water infrastructure, is urgently needed, but it needs to be accompanied by a change in approach in infrastructure planning and management at all levels – local, regional and national.

A background image of water splashing, with white foam and droplets against a light blue background.

Demands on water infrastructure will become more intense with the impact of climate change which is why we propose all local authorities prepare a risk assessment in their long-term planning to help address future infrastructure needs.

National

The next key reform priority for National is the 3 waters. We need to better integrate the Resource Management Act and Local Government Act provisions to better plan and fund new water infrastructure. We will also need to respond to any system problems identified from the Havelock North Inquiry and improve the regulatory environment to better ensure the quality of water services.

New Zealand First

Priorities for granting water rights must place public benefits before private benefits. Accordingly requirements for potable water for people's domestic supplies must prevail over all other takes and uses; the government must invest over time in water schemes which are consistent with these policies; large scale hydro-electricity generators, and large scale geothermal electricity generators, currently state owned enterprises, must remain exclusively in state ownership.

The Opportunities Party

We need to start planning ahead for issues like climate change. If we make superannuation sustainable we can afford to use the NZ Super Fund to invest more in the infrastructure a growing country needs.

Local authorities need also the ability to raise revenue from a variety of sources rather than just rates.

A charge on commercial water users would be a good start.

United Future

In addition to the policies discussed above, we would want to see standards lifted for quality as we face pressures of a rising population and climate change. We would do this by revising national policies around water to ensure more rapid resolution of over-allocation, and to set more stringent quality levels to reduce pollution and improve the ecological health of freshwater ecosystems. In addition, append and strengthen the NPS with a National Environmental Standard for Freshwater to set flow and quality criteria.

We would also explore environmental innovation and sensibility by introducing user pays for all water-takes and polluter pays for any individual or entity who introduces point or non-point polluting discharges into rivers or lakes. [WNZ](#)