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Article rank 13 Dec 2016 The Dominion Post MARTY SHARPE

Gastro inquiry told HDC staff 'fearful'

An urgent inquiry into Havelock North's drinking water contamination has heard that Hastings District Council (HDC) staff feel they may be "trapped" by regional council staff.

The government inquiry met at Hastings District Court yesterday to tackle the question of how sufficient water could be supplied to Havelock North after the closure of two bores involved in the August campylobacter outbreak.

The official investigation into the crisis that affected more than 5300 people was due to start last month but was delayed after Hawke's Bay Regional Council (HBRC) charged the district council for failing to meet maintenance conditions in its resource consent to take water. The district council pleaded not guilty so the matter will be heard next month.

The closure of Brookvale Rd bores one and two meant Havelock North was now drawing water from the bores that used to supply only Hastings, and the system was struggling to meet demand.

District council group asset manager Craig Thew told the inquiry the council planned to start pumping water from Brookvale Rd bore three, which had not been used since the discovery of e-coli in it late last year. Water would be treated so it was safe to drink, Thew said.

Inquiry chairman Lynton Stevens, QC, and assistant counsel Nathan Gedye, QC, queried Thew about the relationship between HDC and the regional council.

Thew said the two were cooperating and the formation of a joint working group, that also involved Hawke's Bay District Health Board, was "critical" to resolving the water supply issues. However, the prosecution had made for a difficult environment.

He said the councils' relationship began well after the outbreak but had become tense, "disruptive" and "a lot more difficult".

HDC staff found it hard to talk with their regional council peers without thinking they may be incriminating themselves.

HBRC chief executive Andrew Newman said according to legal advice, his council's prosecution of HDC was "entirely distinct" to the inquiry. He hadn't believed the charge would have this much impact. In light of the day's discussion, he would take another look at the decision.

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