

Forward momentum

JOHN PFAHLERT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE



Water issues remained firmly top of mind last year with a new focus on collaboration, the creation of draft metadata standards for water assets, and the need to respond to the campylobacter outbreak in Havelock North.

THE PAST YEAR AT WATER NEW ZEALAND has seen a number of changes made to the way we operate that are relevant for members of local government. In conjunction with the Water New Zealand board we undertook a review of an approach taken by this association over the past 10 years to promote corporate models of water governance in the sector.

Despite the evidence in places like Scotland, Tasmania and Auckland that these models can and do work, it was evident that our continued advocacy in this space was becoming counter-productive to good working relations with many territorial local authorities. We have since decided to move away from that approach.

New collaborative approach

Our new modus operandi will see us working in a more collaborative manner with councils and industry, being a stronger advocate for the sector on water-related issues and strengthening our technical capability. This shift in emphasis has been welcomed by management and staff within local government. An organisational restructuring to align staffing with those objectives was completed in 2016.

Oddly enough, our decision to change direction came in a year when the government decided to pursue changes to the Local Government Act to provide for the easier establishment of Council Controlled Organisations for water management – among a range of other proposed changes.

That Bill hasn't gone so well for the government, with the Bill getting a savage mauling in the Select Committee by representatives of local government. The Bill seems unlikely to proceed in its current form any time soon.

Metadata standards

The past year has also seen a great deal of effort put into the development of draft metadata standards for water assets. This government-funded project will be significant for water utilities in the years ahead and represents an opportunity, through providing consistent and commonly used standards for infrastructure projects, to ultimately enable better decision-making in capital and operations maintenance and investment.

The implementation of these standards in coming years gives an opportunity for collaboration within the water sector, with Water New Zealand playing a central role to achieve our stated aim of a "self-determining future". The roll-out of these data standards is expected to start mid-2017.

Havelock North

The other big water issue of 2016 was the unfortunate events affecting the water supply and population of Havelock North. Might I congratulate publicly the president of Local Government New Zealand and mayor of Hastings District Council Lawrence Yule for the way he handled the council's public response to the campylobacter outbreak.

Irrespective of the outcome of the inquiry I personally thought he acquitted himself and his council admirably well in the face of

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some fairly stern media and community opposition. That he was re-elected mayor only a few weeks following the event speaks volumes.

Members of our association have been assisting Hastings District Council and we have sought to provide support as necessary. Because over 5000 residents of Havelock North were made ill from drinking contaminated water, the government established an inquiry to look into the matter.

Water New Zealand is registered as a Core Participant in the inquiry. It is our intention to assist the inquiry in whatever capacity we can, and to continue to advocate for further improvements in

drinking water quality for the future benefit of consumers.

This matter is likely to be a significant issue for our association and local government in 2017. The inquiry probably presages the onset of several years of discussion about the appropriate level of regulatory control of the sector and what changes may be required to the existing system.

The treatment of public water supplies can be seen as a simple matter with a straightforward solution. The inquiry evidence from numerous waterborne outbreaks in affluent nations overseas over the past 20 years tells us that the implementation of some form of multiple physical and / or chemical barrier is needed to effectively reduce to an acceptable level the risk of waterborne disease. This is the case even if the water is supplied from a secure source.

Of course simplistic approaches are just that. In the real world we have central and local body politics to complicate matters. John Key (then Prime Minister) had already stated his reservations about mandatory chlorination of water for Christchurch. At least one MP in Hawkes Bay has signalled his opposition to chlorination.

Whatever the outcome of the government inquiry, I expect to see substantive changes of regulations governing water supply, treatment, oversight and operational practices around water treatment in the years ahead. Councillors and CFOs: you might like to get prepared for spending more on your public water supply networks.

National seminar series and conference

Going forward in 2017 Water New Zealand is planning to run a

national seminar series on water treatment for elected councillors and senior managers to improve their understanding of water treatment.

Finally, on the theme of water treatment, we also have plans to run a two-day conference mid 2017 on the lessons from the Havelock North campylobacter incident. This will be a must-attend event for elected officials and senior managers.

National Performance Review

Every year our association undertakes a benchmarking exercise (The National Performance Review) among councils on how councils manage their 3 Waters assets. We started the survey in 2008 with eight participants. In 2016 we had 51 councils participate.

A range of new information was sought from councils, including:

- How do councils charge for water – through general rating or via targeted rates?
- Have councils undertaken a climate change assessment and what are the expected impacts on water-related assets from climate change?
- How are councils managing in over-allocated catchments?
- How are councils designing their stormwater assets for flooding?

Every year we also run two workshops – one to feed back the essential learnings to participants, and the other to refine the questions we seek answers to.

This survey has close links to the upcoming metadata project. The better we collect information, the more informed our reporting on performance can be, and the better councils manage their assets. **LGP**

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