

From Flint to Havelock North

Should the Government take a larger role in ensuring we all have access to safe drinking water? Water CEO **John Pfahlert** points out that the Havelock North debacle raises wider questions.

The Government inquiry into Havelock North's water contamination provides a prime opportunity for a rethink of the regulatory environment around and whether we need a more consistent approach to ensure all communities are drinking safe water.

The public outrage against the Hastings District Council following the outbreak of campylobacter is understandable. New Zealanders have always expected that the water they pour from their household taps is safe. Havelock North reminds us that drinking untreated water comes with certain risks. While the probability of infection may be low, the consequences of infection can be serious.

Hastings District Council certainly isn't alone in supplying untreated water to a community, despite the calculated risk of contamination. For instance, Lower Hutt City which serves around 70,000 residents does not treat its deep bore water supply, nor does Christchurch with over 300,000 residents. It's likely that around a quarter, or even up to a third, of our national population is drinking untreated tap water.

There are a number of reasons for that. Cost, especially to smaller communities, is one factor. But it's also a matter of taste and preferences. We know that there is strong opposition from some people in the community to chemical additives such as chlorine and fluoride in water supplies.

The Government's "far-reaching" inquiry will look into the actions of the Hastings District Council, how the water supply became contaminated, and the subsequent response. We need to lay-off judgement and recriminations until we see findings.

However, it is very important that through the inquiry we look at the bigger picture and how we supply water to communities. For instance, why is it that we have Drinking Water Standards that are not mandatory? Why don't we require all people managing water treatment plants to hold a relevant qualification? Are the current legislative and regulatory approaches still appropriate?

Water is a public health issue and it's timely that the Government is conducting an independent inquiry into the role Government needs to play in the supply of safe drinking water.

The terms of reference for this current inquiry are quite broad, and it's a discussion that needs to be on the table along with the issue of funding.

Back in 2005, when the Government introduced the Drinking Water Standards, it set up a subsidy scheme in order to help offset the financial burden on smaller councils. But, as this was capped at a lamentably low \$10 million a year, many councils missed out.

Both Water New Zealand and Local Government New Zealand have asked the Government to reinstate this subsidy, but this time backed by a much more realistic financial backing. We've suggested around \$20 million a year is required on an ongoing basis.

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Drinking water quality is an issue of national significance. Given that it's the Government setting the regulatory standards, it needs to come to the party with a realistic level of funding to assist small communities meet those standards.

As the organisation representing councils at the national level on drinking water standards, the independent inquiry provides us with an opportunity to provide sensible technical advice to the inquiry.

I've already established a review group of industry participants to assist Water New Zealand in responding to the inquiry. Later this year, the Water Service Managers Group and Water Utilities Association – representatives of the water utilities – will also be discussing how they believe the system should be altered.

I welcome input from any industry member who believes they have something to contribute to the debate.

Water New Zealand CEO, John Pfahlert