

Freshwater reform – 2013 and beyond

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The future of freshwater

Fresh water has many values and uses for New Zealanders. It is our greatest asset (after people!) and it underpins our wealth and our well-being. It is so fundamental to our primary industries and tourism that it can be regarded as a key component of New Zealand's economic infrastructure.

It is a taonga of intrinsic value to all New Zealanders (with significant cultural and spiritual value for many of us) and it is also part of our identity. Unfortunately, we are not using fresh water as efficiently or as thoughtfully as we should be. Opportunities exist to use it more sustainably.

There are opportunities to grow the economy. But we can only do this by using our fresh water sustainably. The issues we are seeing with water quality in this country are more than 140 years in the making. However, we need to stop the decline and improve freshwater quality. Solutions to these complex issues will not always be found or achieved quickly. We need to start from what we do have and what we do know – and then build from it. This will mean empowering community choices and decisions. No matter where you place yourself on the spectrum of interests in our freshwater resources, we all want a system that is capable of driving economic growth without compromising the integrity of the environment – which is central to our clean, green brand and our unique lifestyle and culture. In short: achieving economic growth within environmental limits.

The journey

Unfortunately the debate around water has focused on the competing pressures that divide us while ignoring the values and aspirations that most of us share.

Since 2009, Government has taken a three-pronged approach to freshwater management:

- Comprehensive work programme led by officials
- Engagement with the Freshwater Iwi Leaders Group (ILG)
- Land and Water Forum (LAWF)

The New Start for Fresh Water strategy, which in 2011 initiated:

- National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management
- Fresh Start for Fresh Water Clean-up Fund
- Irrigation Acceleration Fund

The role of LAWF and ILG:

In 2009 the Government asked the Land and Water Forum to agree on what we need to do to manage water better in New Zealand.

The unique thing about the Land and Water Forum is that it is a group of people and organisations with very diverse interests in water – from farmers and fishers to power generators and environmentalists. This group has spent the last four years discussing the problems we face with fresh water and has produced three reports and more than 150 recommendations on how we can manage water better. We think there is a real appetite for an end to the litigiousness and debates over water, and the collaborative approach of the Land and Water Forum has been a useful model.

Their recommendations, and the advice and constructive relationship the Government has with the Iwi Leaders Group, have greatly influenced the thinking and direction of these reforms.

Message is to get on with it:

We are also hearing a clear message from the many people involved in managing and using water that it is time to stop talking and get on with the job of creating a better system.

We know that changes will have consequences for existing activities. We are determined to make improvements, but these must come within realistic time frames so that we do not adversely affect legitimate activities. This is about creating good practice and an environment that fosters genuine collaboration to create lasting solutions that have wide buy-in by different interests.

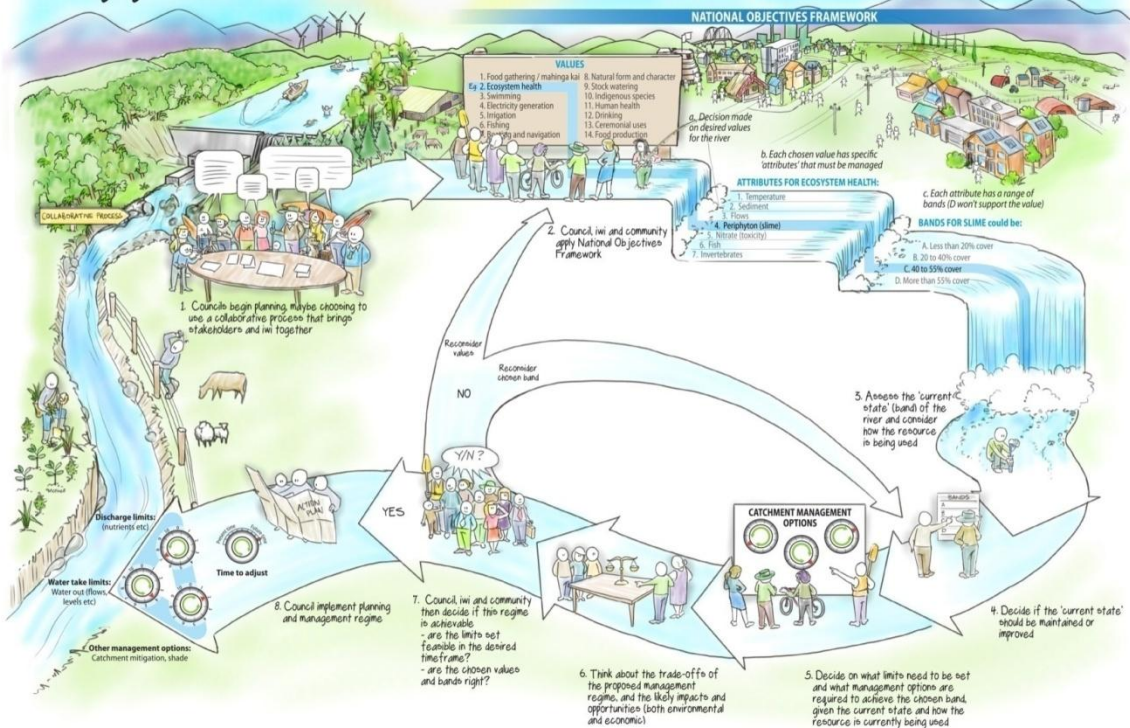
Foundational steps – Government's proposals

We are proposing reforms that start with foundational steps this year, and then continue over several years so we get water quality improvements and build an efficient system within a generation. We're on this journey together and it will be a generation of reforms to ensure sustainable management of our fresh water.

A new way of working together

We are creating a new way of working together to manage our freshwater resource.

Managing fresh water in New Zealand



The above picture, as a whole, illustrates the interconnectedness of the proposals for planning, setting limits and managing within those limits.

It shows the iterative and adaptive nature of the process we are proposing, as well as the *elements* of the reforms:

- Plan together
- Identify what aspects of the water need to be managed for particular values and what the quality of the river or lake is.
- Work out what – if anything – needs to be done to make the water suitable for those values and then set the appropriate limits
- It's really important to think through the management limits or settings – perhaps the cost is too high? – or
- Decide that everything is pretty much right with the settings and manage within the limits that are set.

We need to consider all these elements as a package. Some elements we can start work on now. They form the foundational steps for initiatives that we will introduce in later reforms.

Proposed alternative – collaborative planning process

We are looking at a number of issues and approaches around using collaborative planning processes as an alternative to current practice. This includes looking at:

- Why collaboration?
- Emerging practice – Canterbury, Waikato, and Greater Wellington regional councils
- Overseas experience in resolving 'wicked' problems

- Local solutions for local issues

National framework for setting objectives and limits

Our second key proposal for progressing this year is the creation of a National Objectives Framework.

This will support councils setting objectives and limits as they are required to do under the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management, introduced in 2011.

Community decides values and uses for its fresh water

Communities will decide what they want their local river or lake to be used for and this will be written into the regional plan.

Standard measures for freshwater quality and quantity

The National Objectives Framework provides a standard list of values, metrics and bands for water quality attributes that need to be set if a water body is to meet the values or uses your community wants for its river or lake.

The framework provides a common currency for talking about the science around water quality.

An example

I'll give an example where your community decides that it wants a river – or a stretch of river – to be used for fishing. The framework tells you what attributes of water quality need to be managed if the water is to be suitable for this purpose. In the case of fishing the attributes you would need to manage include flow, slime, temperature, nitrate toxicity and so on. There are four bands from A to D for each attribute and these represent a range of environmental states.

A reference group, including technical experts and sector groups, is working on populating these bands with numeric or other measures for each attribute. This work is still underway and we don't want to focus on those numbers just yet. However, if the attribute falls within Band D it will not be suitable for fishing. This means you have to manage your land and water use so the water quality attribute improves. This is where the iterative process of assessment, adjustment or choices comes into play. It may be that improving the water quality comes at too high a cost and the community will reconsider whether fishing is a desirable activity for this particular river.

National bottom lines

The National Objectives Framework is about communities making decisions around the values and use they want for their region, but the Government will set two national 'bottom lines' to ensure:

- Ecosystem health; all rivers are healthy places for native aquatic plants and animals, and
- Human health; rivers are suitable for activities like boating and wading.

Again, this will need to be managed over realistic time frames. Beyond these two bottom lines, communities will still make the decisions on what they want their river used for.

Next steps

So, in summary, there is still a lot to be done, including:

- Ongoing engagement with iwi/Māori
- Support and guidance for councils implementing the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management
- Work on outstanding policy issues, particularly in relation to managing within limits
- Continuing monitoring and evaluation of reforms