

# Reflections of the Collaborative Process from a Regional Council Perspective

## Landcare Research Freshwater Symposium Talk – Panel discussion – Collaborative processes

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*15 October 2013*

*Overview presented at Freshwater Symposium: Tools for implementing the freshwater reforms, Wellington, organised by the Values, Monitoring & Outcomes research programme, funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.*

Doing things collaboratively is difficult. When I try to cook a meal collaboratively with my partner, I think the onions should go in first, she thinks the garlic should go in first; I want more salt, she wants less and inevitably it ends up with one of us saying, fine you do it. Collaboration doesn't work in the kitchen.

Doing things collaboratively with a large group of people on something really important, more important than dinner, is going to be really difficult. We all come from different backgrounds, we have different worldviews, we see things differently ... and we want different things.

So, working collaboratively on something as important as water is going to be hard.

I think you all know that, and it's why you're all here. It's going to be hard. I haven't got time today to go into all of the ways you can make it easier like good facilitation, having a structured process etc. So I'll just cut to the chase and focus on the good news – it is going to be worth it.

One of the reasons it's going to be worth it is that through collaboration we end up with water 'champions' throughout the community. Not champions in the 'we are the champions' sense, but people championing the cause of better water management.

There are a number of 'hard' parts in collaboration and a significant one is the challenge of diverse people with vastly different interests working together to try to reach a common goal. I'll discuss this and then I'll discuss my experiences with how these people have become water champions.

Someone earlier asked what is new here? What are we doing differently? It is wrong to say that collaboration is something that has suddenly appeared – as if someone all of a sudden had the bright idea that we should talk to each other. No, we've always talked. What is different is now we're doing a lot more talking up-front.

Regional councils' primary tool for managing water is through regional plans and, where in the past these would largely be prepared by councils with some input from stakeholders and

then a draft would be discussed, submitted on, and appealed; now the drafts are being prepared with the stakeholders in the room.

Having a draft regional plan to respond to is what people are used to and I wonder if it's what most people prefer. I think everyone loves getting a document put in front of them that they can then tear to pieces with track changes on. 'Don't like that, delete; that should be written like this, change – aah that looks better.' It's easier to respond or react to something put in front of you than to have a blank page and to have to write it yourself. That really is a paradigm-shift for people because now they, the people, have to decide what's going to go on the page.

A little about my experience in Hawke's Bay. With all of the people associated with the waters in and around the Heretaunga Plains, there are many values and complexities, and trying to meet all of the values and get around the complexities is extremely difficult.

We set up a collaborative stakeholder group 12 months ago and we have met every 5 to 6 weeks. We have technical people and lay people; people who know all about storativity and transmissivity of river substrate and contaminate pathways; people who know all about irrigation practices and soil moisture deficit, nutrient absorption at the root zone; and people who know all about wairua and mauri and that their mahinga kai is gone and taonga are at risk.

And yet together we're trying to set freshwater limits to support all of these interests with a group of people who know about a whole lot of stuff about a whole lot of different things.

We are trying to agree on flow regimes, water allocation limits, instream limits for nitrogen, phosphorus, *E. coli*, clarity, dissolved oxygen; groundwater – surface water connectivity; water efficiency, sharing, transfer rules. The list goes on. And we're not just doing that – we're trying to improve mauri and protect wahi tapu and wahi taonga. And we're trying to make sure estuaries still support recreational and amenity values, etc. etc.

We've been going for around 12 months and we haven't agreed on any of those things – yet. Maybe we won't agree on everything. But do we have to, to call it success?

We have got some agreements already into what we are trying to achieve, e.g. support native fish, and how we will go about trying to achieve things, e.g., we will use RHYHABSIM habitat modelling to assess fish habitat provided by minimum flows. If we can lock things like that in, it will give us less to argue about in court later. Certainly, if we can agree on some philosophies, values, and methodologies, without lawyers, that will be a success. I heard someone once say that *'you know collaboration is working when you are spending more on lunches than on lawyers.'*

The other thing we have agreement in is the process. The members of the group actually want to be there; even though many of them are there voluntarily. We get 80–90% turnout at every meeting.

And now people are out in the community explaining to their friends how water management works and that they're involved in the decision making. And they love it. In a recent public

meeting for council elections, one of our collaborative group stood up and warned any potential new councillors that they better support the group if they get elected –because he's involved and he loves it! We've had others in the group getting annoyed that we don't put out more media releases letting people know that this work is going on – and that they're involved. They get angry when we don't name their group. They want people to know. We had one chap get really annoyed that he was referred to as an individual. 'I'm not here as an individual – I'm here as a representative of the community!'

In other words, they're not just there for a free lunch. They want to be there and they are proud to be there. They like the idea that they can make a difference. They are now water champions.

So, while the huge variety of people with interests in water makes collaboration difficult, it is also an opportunity to build capacity within the community. To create water champions. And this, I think, puts us in great stead for better water management in the future.