

HB Today opinion piece

Recent media coverage around water bottling in Hawke's Bay has not provided our community with the important information it needs to help understand what the key issues are. In this article I provide key facts that may have been overlooked in earlier discussions.

HBRC does have a very important role to sustainably manage the Heretaunga Aquifer (along with the rest of regions natural resources) on behalf of the people of Hawke's Bay. My teams and I are involved in science investigations and regulation of these resources. We take this responsibility very seriously.

Much of the debate being reported concerns who should own water, who should or shouldn't be given access to water, and who should profit from its allocation and use. These are matters of opinion: There are no right or wrong answers.

However, there are some matters about which there should be no debate. These are factual matters that are important for people to understand to help inform these discussions, such as how the aquifer functions and what the law says about resource management and use.

First up, it is being suggested that HBRC is selling water to people from overseas. **We're not.** No-one who holds a resource consent is charged for water, whether they're a New Zealand resident or a foreign investor.

However, we do charge for the work Council does to process resource consent applications and we charge consent holders 35% of the costs we incur to monitor the effect on the environment of their resource use.

New Zealand law does not allow regional councils to charge for water. Even if we could charge, we'd need to be careful how we did so, because there are some potential unintended consequences associated with charging regimes. For example, our city and district councils might need to pay for water used by our towns. It could potentially increase local council rates. Industries using water (Watties and irrigators for example) might need to pay for water. How would this affect their profitability and the number of jobs they provide in Hawke's Bay?

Charging for water is not as simple as slapping on a price per litre – a law change would be required and the pros and cons would need to be carefully explored.

There are suggestions that HBRC chooses what the water is used for. **We don't.** Resource consents for taking groundwater are decided by Council on a 'first come, first served' basis. Each consent application is assessed carefully to ensure the amount applied for fits within any limits in place. We also make sure consent applicants receive only what they actually need, that they are efficient in using it, that they are not affecting neighbouring bores and if the take will impact nearby rivers, lakes or wetlands.

There are pros and cons to the 'first come-first served' approach. One good thing is that Council is not picking 'winners' – it is left to the market to decide what is the most productive use of water. However, as a result communities may feel they are not in control of water management.

Although Council has water allocation limits for most of the region's rivers, there are no allocation limits for aquifers which don't affect river flow. We're engaged in collaborative work with the wider Heretaunga Plains community, including iwi, industry and other stakeholder groups, to decide if this approach should change, and if we should set limits and prioritise how water should be used. This collaborative process will lead to a publicly-notified Plan Change which addresses these issues.

Lots of current discussion concerns bottling plants. Some commentators assume bottling plants are getting water in preference to irrigators. **They're not.** The rules around water allocation and use in each groundwater zone apply to all resource consent holders taking groundwater from that zone, irrespective of the industry involved.

Council manages the 14 zones of the Heretaunga Plains aquifer in different ways. In some zones all groundwater takes are banned when the takes begin to affect nearby rivers, lakes or wetlands. When this happens, every consent holder is banned, no matter what they're using the water for.

Groundwater takes in other aquifer zones do not affect rivers, so Council doesn't ban those takes when river flows drop. How do we know the groundwater takes don't affect rivers? We monitor groundwater levels and quality on the Heretaunga Plains. Seasonal water levels in the Napier/Meeanee groundwater zone where bottling is occurring have remained similar for about 150 years. This indicates the aquifer is not being over exploited.

We know many of you are keen to know more about water bottling activities in Hawke's Bay and we are happy to answer any questions you may have.

Iain Maxwell
Hawke's Bay Regional Council
Group Manager – Resource Management