



Sustainable Development
New Zealand Programme of Action



Ministry for the
Environment
Manatū Mō Te Taiao

Freshwater for the Future



As New Zealand's freshwater comes under growing pressure, Government is working with local government, sector and interest groups on a dynamic new approach to water management. This document explains why this new approach is needed and what it will address.

Under pressure: the state of freshwater in New Zealand

Freshwater is fundamental to the New Zealand way of life. Our rivers, lakes, streams, wetlands and groundwater systems are among our most valued natural assets – not only for their beauty, but also for the many recreational, economic and cultural activities they support.

New Zealanders value the high quality of our freshwater resources. Yet due to changing land use patterns, water quality is declining in some of our lowland streams as an unintentional consequence of these changes. We have until now possibly taken our abundance of freshwater for granted.



As a country we are not short of water, yet demands on freshwater in some regions for farming, hydroelectricity, industry, recreation, tourism and more, are increasing and in many cases are exceeding water availability beyond what is sustainable. There are calls for the environmental, ecological and cultural qualities of New Zealand's water bodies to be protected, so they can be used and enjoyed for generations to come.

Faced with these competing demands, New Zealand's freshwater resources are under pressure. For example:

- In some parts of the country, demand for water (especially for irrigation) exceeds availability.
- The effects of climate change are beginning to be seen on New Zealand's drier east coast, and the amount of water available there is declining.
- Water quality in many lowland streams throughout the country is deteriorating, mostly because of changes in the way land is used. About half of all lowland water bodies consistently fail to meet key water quality guidelines.

While water management is always difficult, trends now emerging point to shortcomings in New Zealand's freshwater management framework. In the face of changing demands and uses for water, New Zealand needs a more sophisticated, flexible and innovative framework.

The current framework makes it difficult to prioritise the competing demands for water, and to manage those demands fairly and efficiently.

Government leadership is needed to ensure our freshwater resources can provide for New Zealand's social, cultural, environmental and economic wellbeing – now and in the future. That is why Government has put in place a Sustainable Water Programme of Action to look at the pressures our freshwater resources are facing, to talk with New Zealanders about their concerns for freshwater, and to recommend to Cabinet a way forward. This document summarises what we have found out, and what we believe needs to be done to improve freshwater management in New Zealand.

What New Zealanders told us about water management

In early 2005, the Government held meetings and hui throughout New Zealand to discuss the problems facing the water management framework, and to identify possible solutions. We also received about 300 written submissions.

Through this consultation process, we heard from hundreds of groups and individuals – local government, landowners, businesses, industry groups, sector groups, iwi, community organisations and individuals. While a diverse range of interests and views was expressed, some common themes emerged.

People wanted to see:

- greater strategic planning for water, nationally and regionally
- clearer direction and guidance from central government
- greater consistency in the way increasing demands on water resources are managed across the country
- a better framework for deciding between conflicting demands for water
- more effective Māori participation in water management
- better management of the impacts of diffuse discharges¹ on water quality.

Drawing on this feedback, Cabinet has now approved a package of actions to be discussed and developed. Over the coming months, we will be discussing these proposals with local government and other parties and beginning to implement them. It is very likely that some modifications and refinements will be made to the present proposals: the expertise, knowledge and experience of all those with a stake in water management will contribute to the framework that is finally implemented.



¹ A diffuse discharge is any general discharge or seepage (either over or under ground) of water-borne material which is not from any readily identifiable point.

Government's proposals for action

The Government has identified three national outcomes for freshwater:

- Improve the quality and efficient use of freshwater by building and enhancing partnerships with local government, industry, Māori, science agencies and providers, and rural and urban communities.
- Improve the management of the undesirable effects of land use on water quality through increased national direction and partnerships with communities and resource users.
- Provide for the increasing demands on water resources and encourage efficient water management through increased national direction, working with local government on options for supporting and enhancing local decision making, and developing best practice.

1. *Strengthening partnerships*

Government wants to enhance its existing partnerships with local government, Māori, sector groups, science agencies, industry and communities.

There are already some productive joint initiatives in place that are improving water management practices. For example, the partnership between central and local government and the dairy industry, the *Dairying and Clean Streams Accord*, has helped achieve tangible improvements in land management to improve water quality more quickly than expected. In Taupo, several national, local and community organisations, including iwi groups, are working together to protect Lake Taupo's long-term water quality and regenerative capacity.

These examples show the effectiveness of the partnership approach in tackling problems of water quality and demand. Ways Government will seek to strengthen and expand existing partnerships include:

- Establishing a leadership group reporting to the Ministers for the Environment and of Agriculture comprising local government representatives and key stakeholders.
- Involving local government representatives in the scoping and development of sound national policy statements, national environmental standards and best practice programmes for freshwater management.
- Ensuring councils are partners in any industry sector agreements.
- Working with industry, landowners and others to develop agreed targets for land management activities which adversely affect water quality.



- Working with science agencies and providers to identify information gaps, and ensure that their work meets the needs of end users (such as local government).
- Working with Māori to develop and implement opportunities for engagement, to improve participation in decision making processes, and develop guidance for councils on incorporating Māori values into policy making and planning.
- Working with rural and urban communities to raise awareness of water issues, and get people involved in improving the environmental quality of their local water bodies.

2. *Managing the undesirable effects of land use on water quality*

Recent research shows that about half of New Zealand's lowland water bodies consistently fail to meet key quality guidelines (which set standards for water clarity, and the level of microbes and nutrients).

One of the main causes of declining water quality is the discharge of contaminants, through land use either directly into waterways or onto land. As more land is used more intensively for activities such as urban development, agriculture, forestry and horticulture, water bodies have to cope with increasing levels of contaminants – micro-organisms, sediment, nutrients from fertilisers and animal excrement.

Government is committed to putting in place a water management framework that protects New Zealand's surface and groundwater from the undesirable effects of rural and urban land use activities. Many local authorities, landowners and sector organisations are already working to address the problem in their areas. But it needs to be tackled on a larger scale, through a mix of partnership, industry-agreed targets and central government direction.



Specific government proposals include:

- Developing agreed targets for land uses that impact on water quality, in consultation with local government and sector organisations.
- Providing information and advice to land users so that they can modify their practices to reduce the level of contaminants entering water bodies.
- Undertaking a national programme to identify and assess those water bodies that are most affected by rural and urban land use activities.
- Considering the potential value of and options for a national policy statement on nutrients, microbial contaminants and sediment on water bodies.

3. *Managing the increasing demands for water and encouraging efficient water management*

The public consultation process confirmed the need for central government to take leadership on some freshwater issues and provide direction in freshwater management. A national framework for freshwater would allow for sustainable long-term management of water at a national level and set national priorities that would allow water to be allocated efficiently, flexibly and to the most valued uses.

Ways Government proposes to address this include:

- Establishing the scope and draft of a national policy statement and/or national environment standards – for example, policy on the potential uses and values to be considered in allocating water and/or a standard setting the methods and criteria by which councils could require water measuring devices in certain circumstances. Government will work with stakeholders and the public to decide whether it is appropriate to introduce such tools.

- Developing criteria in partnership with environmental, recreational, industry and sectoral groups, local government and Māori for identifying nationally outstanding natural water bodies.
- Investigating current practices and developing enhanced methods for transferring water consents (resource consents allowing users to take and use water from a given location) to other locations in the same catchment. In places where there is heavy demand for water, greater use of transfers might allow water to be used more efficiently and also reduce the level of contaminants entering water bodies.

Questions and answers

Q: How is freshwater managed at present?

A: The Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) sets the framework for freshwater management, and is administered by the Ministry for the Environment. Under the RMA, central government can be involved in water management by issuing national policy statements and environmental standards, managing the process for developing water conservation orders (orders that protect the outstanding ‘amenity or intrinsic values’ of a particular water body), and making submissions on regional councils’ plans.

Freshwater is managed by regional councils who are responsible for the water bodies within their boundaries through implementation of the RMA. They manage water allocation and quality issues by means of regional policy statements and regional plans (which can specify the amount of water that can be taken from certain water bodies and state how the water is allocated to users) and through the resource consent process.

People wanting to take or use freshwater or to discharge to water must apply to the council for a resource consent. Their application is assessed against the council's regional plan and/or policy statement. If a resource consent is granted, the applicant is given a water or discharge permit. These permits are site-specific but can be transferred to new owners or occupiers of a site, and sometimes to other sites within the same catchment. As some water bodies become heavily allocated, there is growing demand to transfer consents. Different councils take different approaches to dealing with new applications once a water body is fully allocated.

Q: What is the Government proposing to do about water management?

A: After an extensive public consultation process, the Government has decided to take a three-pronged approach to improving the water management framework including:

- Building partnerships with local government, industry, Māori, science agencies and providers, and rural and urban communities.
- Managing the undesirable effects of land use on water quality.
- Providing for the increasing demands on water resources and encouraging efficient water management.

Possible actions in each of these areas have been proposed as part of the Sustainable Water Programme of Action, and will now be worked on further with key stakeholders.

Q: What is the Sustainable Water Programme of Action?

A: This is a Government programme established in 2003 to ensure freshwater resources are managed and used in ways that support New Zealand's long-term sustainable development. It is part of the Government's wider Sustainable Development Programme of Action, which also covers energy, sustainable cities, and investing in young people.

The Sustainable Water Programme of Action is jointly led by the Ministry for the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. It also involves the Department of Conservation, the Ministry of Economic Development, the Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, the Department of Internal Affairs, regional councils and other local authorities.

It has also involved representatives of regional councils and other local authorities, a Māori Reference Group² and a Stakeholder Reference Group³.

The proposed actions outlined in this document were developed by Sustainable Water Programme of Action officials, and have been approved by Cabinet.

Q: How has the public been involved?

A: Many New Zealanders have already contributed to discussions about the future of water management. Many people attended the meetings and hui held around the country in early 2005, and/or sent in submissions. The key themes that emerged from the consultation process are summarised on page 2. Minutes and reports from consultation meetings are also available on the Ministry for the Environment's and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's websites.

The groups and individuals who have contributed to the debate include local government, primary producers, iwi and other Māori groups, representatives of business and industry, research/science providers, environmental groups and other community organisations. The proposals we have developed reflect their views and concerns, and we will be inviting stakeholders to help refine these proposals.

Q: Will the proposed changes affect the role of local government?

A: Regional councils are the primary managers of freshwater resources, and will continue to be so. While the Government wants to set a clear national direction for water quality and quantity, that direction will continue to take effect through regional policy statements and regional water plans.

However, the Government wants to strengthen the water management tools that are already available to councils under the Resource Management Act, and develop new tools as necessary. For example, best practice programmes for water management could be developed, and new methods to manage over-allocated catchments. A National Environmental Standard could establish which methods for setting environmental flows are appropriate in various circumstances. Central government will work closely with regional councils to develop any new or improved water management tools so that they are appropriate for local circumstances.

² *The views of the Māori Reference Group are not representative of any particular iwi. There were five members of the Māori Reference Group.*

³ *Interests represented in the Stakeholder Reference Group include recreation, agriculture, horticulture, environmental groups, irrigation, hydroelectricity generation, industry, business, forestry and hydrological and freshwater science societies.*

Q: What about the Resource Management Act?

A: Government believes the Resource Management Act continues to provide the best legislative framework for managing freshwater. Changes to the Act were recently introduced to improve the management of all natural resources, including water.

Q: Is the Government proposing to privatise water?

A: No. Freshwater is a public resource and we will not be privatising water.

Q: What happens next?

A: The package of actions to improve water management outlined in this document will be investigated, developed and/or implemented over the next two years. The first step will be to establish a leadership group where Government will invite stakeholders to help scope the proposed actions. None of these proposals are fully developed – to achieve the best possible outcomes, Government wants ongoing input from all those with an interest in water.

Because some proposals will take more time to develop than others, officials involved in the Programme will report back to Cabinet at different times between spring 2006 to 2008. It should be noted that these are long-term proposals aimed at setting a framework for the future. The effects of any changes may not be seen for some time.

How can I find out more?

The following background documents are available online from the Ministry for the Environment (www.mfe.govt.nz) and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (www.maf.govt.nz) or by writing to the Ministry for the Environment at PO Box 10-362, Wellington for printed copies.

Documents relating to the public consultation process (July 2005):

‘Reflections: A Summary of Your Views on the Sustainable Water Programme of Action’

‘Wai Ora: Report of the Sustainable Water Programme of Action Consultation Hui’

‘Report of the Sustainable Development Water Programme of Action Local Government Workshops’

‘Report of the Sustainable Development Water Programme of Action Public Meetings’

‘Testing the Water: Report on the Sustainable Water Programme of Action Written Submissions’

Minutes and notes from the consultation meetings are also available.

Discussion document (December 2004):

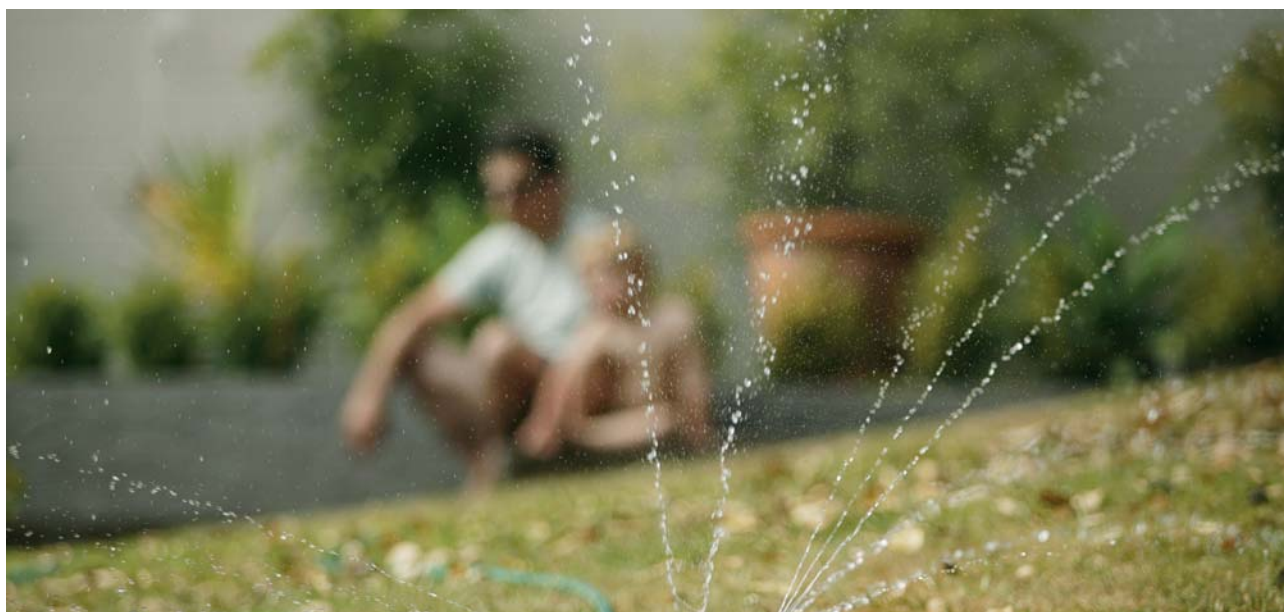
‘Freshwater for a sustainable future: issues and options’

Technical working papers (July 2004):

‘Water Allocation and Use’

‘The Effects of Rural Land Use on Water Quality’

‘Potential Water Bodies of National Importance’



More information about the Water Programme of Action is available on the Ministry for the Environment's website: www.mfe.govt.nz and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's website: www.maf.govt.nz
