



Established 1968

# New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society

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## **OPEN LETTER TO FRESHWATER SCIENCE WORKERS, EMPLOYERS AND FUNDERS**

### **Work-related stress**

The New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society (NZFSS) enjoys the support of over 320 members engaged in freshwater research, education, consultancy and management throughout the country. As current President of this Society, I have recently become concerned over the levels of work-related stress some of our members are experiencing. Workplace stress is a concern for the Society if it interferes with the generation and transfer of information or deters members from pursuing careers in freshwater science and management, not to mention the effects on general well-being.

The declining health of our freshwater ecosystems is widely acknowledged as one of New Zealand's top environmental issues. Therefore, it is particularly important that New Zealand maintains and enhances the capacity that it has in freshwater science and management. The demands on existing capacity appear to be increasing and workplace burnout has become a concern for some of our members. With increasing awareness of this issue, I conducted a poll to get a feel for the significance of work-related stress among NZFSS members.

The intention of this open letter is to share the results of this poll with employers, funders, and individuals engaged in freshwater science in the hope that it may highlight some issues and potential solutions that help alleviate work-related stress in the future. The poll was emailed to all NZFSS members with 63 responses received, equivalent to a self-selected response rate of around 17%. Recipients were asked to indicate (i) their levels of work-related stress (very low, low, moderate, high, very high), (ii) whether work-related stress was affecting their sense of personal well-being (yes, no), and (iii) how much stress levels had increased over recent years (no increase, a little, a lot).

Around 60% of respondents indicated that work-related stress levels were "high" or "very high" and affected their well-being, with almost half reporting that stress had increased "a lot" over recent years. Respondents were also asked to indicate causes of stress and what could be done to alleviate it. I have grouped these responses into themes in the attached table with specific points presented in order of importance indicated as the percentage of times related issues were highlighted by respondents. For me, several key points emerged from these responses:

- High and fragmented workloads coupled with tight deadlines and high client expectations are a major cause of stress.

- Declining and insecure funding is increasing workload pressure and causing job security concerns.
- Increasing pressure on freshwater resources can translate to increased pressure on freshwater science workers who are highly self-driven and strive to achieve beneficial outcomes in the face of declining resources.
- Increased levels and security of funding, particularly long-term core funding, to provide stability and enable increased support are by far most likely to decrease work-related stress.
- Several workplace and personal strategies can help reduce work-related stress.

As stated above, the purpose of this letter is to share the results of this poll with individuals and organisations who might be interested. I hope you find some of this information helpful in identifying and alleviating work-place stress.

Yours sincerely



Dr Kevin Collier  
President, New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society

<b>PRESSURES</b>		<b>%</b>
<b>Workload</b>		
• Fragmented		<b>44.3</b>
• Tight deadlines		10.1
• Too high		10.1
• Client demands/expectations		8.9
• Diversity of roles required		5.7
• Presenting evidence at hearings		3.2
• Complex and adversarial legislation		3.2
<b>Funding</b>		
• Insufficient/declining resources		<b>25.9</b>
• Insecure/inconsistent funding		9.5
• Science funding process/ bureaucracy		7.0
• Commercial requirements		7.0
		2.5
<b>Workplace</b>		
• Staff/student management		<b>15.2</b>
• Administrative requirements		4.4
• Lack of management communication/planning		3.2
• Technical difficulties/lack of support		3.8
• Workplace bullying		1.9
• Working environment		1.3
		0.6
<b>Personal</b>		
• Self-driven/commitment		<b>14.6</b>
• Lack of planning/reading time		6.3
• Increasing pressure on freshwater environments		3.2
• Tension/competition among peers		3.2
• Poor time management		1.3
		0.6

<b>SOLUTIONS</b>		<b>%</b>
<b>Funding, resources and processes</b>		
• Change competitive science model - stable/long-term funding		<b>58.3</b>
• More resources for technical/science support		22.2
• More funding		15.3
• Simplified funding process		12.5
• More financial incentives/remuneration		5.6
• Consensus based approach to environmental legislation		1.4
		1.4
<b>Workplace and workload strategies</b>		
• Reduce administration load/more admin. support		<b>20.8</b>
• Better organisational planning and prioritisation		6.9
• Strategies to deal with workplace bullying		6.9
• Improved workplace environment		2.8
• Provide more tools for managers		1.4
• More flexibility in deadlines		1.4
		1.4
<b>Personal strategies</b>		
• More thinking/reading/planning time (incl. sabbaticals)		<b>20.9</b>
• Increased exercise breaks		6.9
• More field work		4.2
• Increased social contact		2.8
• Improved time (and desk) management		2.8
• Slow down resource use		2.8
		1.4