



Established 1968

New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society

Media Release: New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society airs concerns about National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management

The New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society (NZFSS) is the major national society for individuals and organisations with interests in freshwater sciences, management and education in New Zealand and internationally, with more than 350 members. The Society strongly endorses many aspects of the National Policy Statement in Freshwater Management (NPS), particularly in addressing the present inefficiencies of water use in New Zealand and in setting limits for both water quantity and quality that will ensure there is not continued degradation of freshwater resources. “Over the past decade or so New Zealanders have witnessed accelerated degradation of many waterbodies in response to diffuse nutrients derived mostly from agricultural sources”, says the Society President, Professor David Hamilton. “The limits-based approach in the NPS is designed to arrest this degradation and will ensure that land use practices are aligned with the national goal of ensuring clean freshwater in downstream environments”. The Society hopes that the requirement that the NPS in Freshwater Management sets objectives and policies that regional councils must address in their RMA planning and decision-making will bring alignment in the approach adopted by councils across New Zealand. For example, in addressing the need for an NPS in Freshwater Management, the Minister for the Environment identified that only four out of seventeen regional councils have a set of operative or proposed limits for water flow and quality.

Professor Hamilton sees ‘devil in the detail’ of the Minister’s announcement, however, and is calling for several issues to be addressed in a timely manner. “The work programme for the ‘Fresh Start for Fresh Water’ has already identified the potential for ‘gold rushes’ of land use change prior to the implementation of the NPS in Freshwater Management”. “Such changes would be completely at odds with the desired outcome of the NPS, particularly for catchments that are sensitive to pollution, or that have specific cultural or environmental freshwater values, in addition to where available freshwater is already over-allocated such as in areas of Canterbury. The Society wishes to see the NPS implemented in a way which will prevent further land use change and degradation of selected waterbodies so that costly clean-up steps are avoided. “New Zealanders are already bearing a substantial cost for the protection of Lake Taupo and the restoration of the Rotorua lakes and the Waikato River”, says Hamilton. “There is some acceptance that this cost will be spread across the community given that there was limited knowledge of the implications of past land use changes on water quality and quantity, but this is no longer the case and we cannot continue to externalise the costs to communities and the New Zealand taxpayer of pollution by private industries”. The irrigation fund of up to \$400 million approved by Cabinet, to fast-track regional irrigation schemes is an example of externalising the costs of greater water efficiency and expanding the irrigation infrastructure while at the same time the Fresh Start for Fresh Water Clean-up Fund will provide only \$15 million in additional funding over two years to help communities clean up waterways that are affected by historical pollution.

Hamilton says that it is not in New Zealand’s interests to continue to degrade waterbodies even if the Minister for the Environment indicates that “it is agreed that the economic benefits are sufficient to outweigh the other costs”. Hamilton points to previous statements that large waterbodies such as Lake Ellesmere in Canterbury and Lake Waikare in Waikato are “dead”, and notes that even these so-called dead waterbodies support tens of species of birds and fish including threatened and endangered species, as well as having significant values for local iwi”. “In the interests of ‘100% pure NZ’ we

cannot continue along this pathway”. “Changes of wording in the NPS from ‘avoid’ to ‘avoid, remedy or mitigate’ could have “major implications for freshwater management as working examples of mitigation in New Zealand are few, while remedy of degraded water bodies has only come at huge costs to the ratepayer and taxpayer”, says Hamilton.

The New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society has concerns that the NPS in Freshwater Management does not reflect some of the recommendations of the wide-ranging and comprehensive Land and Water Forum (LWAF) Report which was recently accepted by the Minister for the Environment. Of particular concern in documentation supporting the NPS is that by not adopting the LAWf recommendation this “could be perceived by some, including environmental groups, as having weakened the NPS”. This would appear to be counter to the LAWf recommendations that the NPS should set clear bottom lines (standards) for the maintenance of freshwater quality and provide strong strategic direction with regard to freshwater management.

Finally, the Society welcomes the recommendation that a review of the NPS be implemented within five years of it taking effect but it has major concerns about the pace with which the NPS objectives will be adopted in regional policy statements, and regional and district plans. “Councils can request to be given until 2030 to achieve implementation. One hesitates to guess what sort of state some waterways may be in by that time based on current trends provided by scientists in the Society”, says Hamilton. “Varying rates of adoption of the NPS in Freshwater Management across different councils could hinder the desired outcome of a consistent limits-based approach for freshwater management and the implementation of national standards desired by the NPS”. The Society recommends that the five-year review emphasise clear expectations to be met by councils, and that, at the time of the review, an audit should be conducted to ensure that all councils are complying with the directions provided by the NPS.

Contact for media enquiries:
David Hamilton,
President, New Zealand Freshwater Sciences Society
Email: davidh@waikato.ac.nz
Phone: 07 858 5946, 021 135 7288

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