

## River pollution debate at crucial point

As we resign ourselves to one of the wettest years on record, it seems paradoxical that river “swimmability” has become such a key election issue. Record rainfall is flushing out Taranaki’s 500-plus named streams with such regularity that pollution couldn’t seem further from our minds.

But that will change come summer, and what happens then about ensuring our waterways are safe places to swim will assume greater importance than at any other time in Taranaki’s history.

Confused? You’re excused, because after all we’ve been assured for many years by the official guardian of our rivers, Taranaki Regional Council, that waterways have been getting better as the effects kick in from riparian margins and a switch to dairy farm land irrigation for cowshed effluent.

However, there’s a big question, an issue that’s been bubbling quietly away for years and which now hangs uncomfortably – are our streams polluted or not?

How soon that is answered depends on who wins next weekend’s poll – National with its hands-off approach to dairy farm pollution or Labour with its growing support to do much more to make rivers swimmable.

National has ensured there is an out-clause big enough to drive a milk tanker through when it comes to imposing stronger remedies on dairy farmers, a stipulation that nobody may suffer economic and other hardships.

In contrast, Labour has not only promised a water tax to fund remedial action, but is less likely to sympathise with farming industry resistance, although just how far it would go to impose further cost on an already fragile main export earner remains to be seen.

Relevant to this changed political landscape is something of a standoff between TRC and the government department charged with bringing in newly formulated national water standards, the Ministry for the Environment.

On the surface, the stalemate seems straight-forward – the ministry says TRC has been somewhat dragging its feet in planning for the new requirements, while the TRC rejects that and says it has the local experience and well-developed systems to continue doing the job in its own good and non-confrontational time.

At the heart of this is an argument that’s been going on a long time – that the ministry’s grading of our rivers using a largely artificial “predictive modelling” system gives unrealistically negative results, compared with those the council gets from bacterial tests it does each week over summer, along with analysis it carries out in the context of long-accumulated test data and experience.

One alarming result is a ministry map on its website that shows all our rivers are risky for swimming. It’s a maze of yellow, orange and red warning colours. In contrast, TRC maps published online each summer in the past have been mostly green for go, with a few places marked risky mainly because of bird droppings.

What’s particularly crucial is the council’s recent prediction that even when it completes its riparian planting and fencing programme (about 2020) and all 1900 Taranaki dairy farms have converted pond drainage to land irrigation (in about a decade), that still won’t be enough to meet the ministry’s unrealistic standards.

In a Daily News story headed ‘No rain, no cows, no problem’, one of TRC’s head scientists said only less rain and reduced cow numbers would enable the province to curb pasture runoff enough to lower bacteria levels to ministry requirements. Assuming such a climate change is unlikely, that leaves two options – cutting down dairy herd sizes, or accepting the TRC’s analysis of river risks ahead of the ministry’s.

The ministry seems unlikely to back down. It argues that once-a-week sampling of a river at any particular site provides only a limited snapshot of bacteria levels, given that waterways can change by the hour. Relying mainly on such monitoring is like hoping a GP will diagnose blood pressure

fluctuations from a single reading. River monitoring methods don't include the equivalent of a BP cuff that can record 24/7.

The approach the ministry insists everybody must use to give overall risk gradings involves a computer programme analysing a wide range of data about a river catchment (including test results). That produces an educated guess on the likelihood of risk. On the other hand, TRC says its time-honoured approach shows that for 85 percent or more of the time most rivers are safe.

It's a conundrum that will remain no matter who gets elected next weekend. The only thing likely to be affected is how soon political action forces a resolution.