

Heavy fines show TRC persistence

My regular readers - all four of us – will know I've more than a passing interest in water pollution. I wrote a book about it once. A few people read it, although not so far as I know my harshest critic, Mike Joy the environmental scientist.

Recently, a first-term councillor for Taranaki Regional Council (the book's based on its voluminous basement library) told me she'd only just discovered the book's existence and was finding it useful. That's a plus.

Anyway, it's not surprising my curiosity is still piqued by news stories like one this month that included a national league table of pollution infamy. It listed the biggest fines handed out during 2017-2018 to New Zealand's 12,000-odd dairy farming companies and farmers.

What I found intriguing was Taranaki had only three on the list of 23 - but that trio was stung with most of the stiffest penalties; their fines of \$54,000, \$45,000 and \$35,000 ranked second, third and eighth highest. We'll look at possible reasons shortly.

The list was dominated by cases from Southland (8) and Otago (6), perhaps partly because of the average size of their herds – nearly 600, compared to 280 in Taranaki and 350 in Waikato – and the fact South Island regions have been creating the newest dairy operations over recent decades, so more has probably been spent on development than protection of the environment (as used to happen in Taranaki).

Another noticeable thing about the table is that while Taranaki's big dairy neighbour, Waikato, has a third of New Zealand's dairy herds and 28 percent of the country's cows, only four prosecutions were taken successfully there and the fines were much lower. They ranked ninth, 13th, 14th and 17th, and totalled just over \$100,000.

Compare that to Taranaki's three cases, which added up to \$134,000 (20 percent of the year's total fines of \$660,000 for the 23 cases) – yet Taranaki has only 14 percent of total herds and 10 percent of the nation's cows. The average fine achieved by TRC was \$45,000. No other regional council with multiple cases averaged more than \$30,000, with Waikato's only \$25,000 and Otago's \$21,000.

Obviously, many factors are at play, and only analysis of long-term national trends would give us a clearer picture, something TRC might like to provide one day. Meantime, we're left with the impression Taranaki is much tougher on its farmers than anywhere else is.

That would be wrong, in my view. What may be showing here (but not in Waikato for some reason) is the logical maturity of the Taranaki system. Well, two systems actually. One is the monitoring and punishing one and the other is the TRC's long-running, patient campaign to get farmers to clean up their act. Both have been going since the early 1970s, a period approaching half a century.

The council has given farmers plenty of time to come into line, especially with its riparian fencing and planting programme, an initiative that has achieved remarkable success given its application has leant more towards voluntary than compulsory (although if you don't do it, you may eventually be punished for what results).

TRC has put gradual pressure on farmers to stop disposing of treated cowshed waste into streams and instead spray it on pasture. Plus, historically there has been the disappearance of

all but one dairy manufacturing plant (there were once more than 100) and the amalgamation of farms into larger economic units.

Most farmers come gradually into line as they can afford it in the good years. It now seems obvious that those few in a hard core who persist in ignoring TRC's more-than-reasonable approach will eventually cop a massive fine (past years have seen even higher ones).

There are other ways of judging how TRC has done, for example scientific analysis by NIWA. Its latest shows the riparian programme (running for nearly 30 years) has worked to an encouraging degree, judging by bacteria levels and increased numbers of small creatures in most of the streams tested (about 20 out of 530 named ones in the province).

Farming still has pollution impacts not yet fully dealt with or properly monitored, and there is that confounding national river swimming safety map that shows we're less than 30 percent compliant. According to TRC, that's influenced by the government insisting our streams are tested at all times – even when they run high from heavy rainfall. Most of us aren't dumb enough to swim then.