

Benefits may lie in govt's attack

What are we to make of Environment Minister David Parker's censure of the country's regional councils for failing to keep waterways clean?

He probably feels safe doing so because he's in the company of campaigners who have been saying for decades the country is not living up to its international image.

The critics' message is effective if judged by a national poll that found 82 percent of respondents are worried about polluted rivers and lakes.

The obvious question for Taranakians is whether the minister can fairly include our guardian council in his sweeping criticism.

I think not. Yes, there are still problems in the region's many streams and lakes, but to say Taranaki Regional Council is among those that have failed ignores reality.

TRC has long been criticised for what seems a snail pace approach to bringing the dairy industry into line, but that was appropriate after the at-times confrontational and thus counter-productive line pursued by its predecessor, the catchment commission.

In both iterations though, it has for half a century pushed and supported farmers to fence and plant waterway margins, and now about three quarters of streams deeper than a redtop gumboot have been done.

The council says its riparian management programme will be nearly complete by the end of this decade. More than 15,409km of stream banks are covered by riparian plans agreed between the council and landowners, and under those plans 85.7 percent (13,207km) of streams have been fenced, and 71.7 percent (8399km) of banks planted.

There is still debate about whether the riparian strips are enough, given their narrowness doesn't prevent all pollutants percolating through to streams. However, if the planting has included trees there will be benefits to come as they mature and provide shade to keep water temperatures down in summer, a key gain.

The council has been helped by incidental changes, such as closure of all but one dairy factory and improvements to urban sewage treatment schemes.

It is forcing other modifications, such as a gradual switch from direct treatment pond outfalls into waterways to spraying cow effluent back onto pastures, which enables farmers to reduce artificial fertilisers that can cause pollution.

As I have noted in this column before, there are empirical indications that Taranaki has moved ahead of the bunch in terms of nailing persistent polluters, a judgement that can be made from the high level of fines being copped by those prosecuted.

The seemingly drawn-out approach taken to offenders has the benefit of encouraging most to fall into line - but those not co-operating face penalties approaching \$100,000. There are more such cases here than elsewhere in the country.

Minister Parker's comments are political in the sense that improving our natural waterways to be "swimmable" was one of Prime Minister Ardern's three main election planks, and he is no doubt under pressure to show progress.

A problem for TRC is the approach taken by Parker's ministry.

TRC's head scientist, Gary Bedford, has said Ministry for the Environment gradings are based not only on actual water sampling but also on what kind of land use exists in catchments. In Bedford's opinion, if you're dairy, or urban like Auckland, you have no hope of getting a fair assessment.

The result is MfE maps that show none of Taranaki's 17 sampled rivers have "excellent" or even "good" gradings, which ranks the province 13th out of the country's 15 regional councils.

In contrast, TRC's summer safe swimming programme had been running nearly a quarter century and indicated about 70 percent of sites are safe for at least 85 percent of the time (they deteriorate a lot for three days after floods, so no testing was done then and people warned not to swim).

Bedford is concerned that testing for swimmability must now happen all year round, no matter what the conditions, normal flow or flood. That can produce E. coli counts of 50,000 to 60,000 (the action level is a mere 540).

MfE regulations allow a water body to have one such errant result every two years, but it can't exceed 1200. He said that's unworkable because freshes happen regularly, including during summer.

Another problem is effluent freshly sprayed on pasture can be washed away by heavy rainfall.

TRC estimates Taranaki agriculture has so far spent more than \$80 million on pollution prevention. Parker got \$229m in the budget to do more. If MfE believes Taranaki is such a problem, we ought to get a big chunk of that. Yes please, Minister.