

A septic problem in our streams

It seems an odd thing to admit now, but I grew up in a family home that polluted.

I was reminded of it when I read New Plymouth Mayor Neil Holdom's article outlining a clever way to get the government to pay for much-needed improvements to the country's reticulation systems - by refunding GST on rates.

The Tucker place was slightly below street level and had a septic tank for our sewage, its overflow pipe leading indirectly to a gully next door through which a tiny stream trickled towards the sea.

Our septic tank seepage could never have been discovered because it was connected to an underground stormwater pipe that ran from a sports field on one side of our property to the creek on the other.

We never figured how the stream reached the coast because it disappeared into a big pipe that wandered off beneath earthworks done to build the sports ground.

As Holdom said, such arrangements were common in the distant past (about 1950 in this case) in the belief out of sight was out of mind.

If indeed there was seepage, it mixed with stormwater from the field. Only a test for E.coli bacteria where the pipe emptied into the stream would have suggested anything untoward.

No test was ever done, because in Taranaki and the rest of New Zealand streams no deeper than a gumboot top don't count in the monitoring rules. A convenient idea, but unsatisfactory because as most primary school children can tell you, big waterways begin with an accumulation of little ones.

Holdom's article was illustrated by a telling sign on the banks of the Urenui River indicating the waterway and its mudflats have the highest degree of bacteriological risk. It didn't include a green option for "all good", which suggests such nirvana is never achieved.

The sign caption mentioned septic tanks, which reminded me of Te Henui Awa, which was probably where our septic tank runoff ended up. Te Henui has a pollution problem at its mouth, where kids swim if their parents don't notice the permanent warning signs. I've seen that happen.

Taranaki Regional Council, New Plymouth District Council and Taranaki District Health Board (they spread responsibility among themselves) say birdlife is the main cause of pollution. I presume that means nothing short of shooting or poisoning them can fix it, so it remains unfixed.

Birds are a handy diversion for the councils and board, because birds flock near the mouths of all Taranaki rivers that empty into the sea near beaches, like the Waimoku (Oakura Beach), the Waiwhakaiho, the Urenui, the Waingongoro (Ohawe) and others.

I wonder, though.

Back in 2012, Taranaki Regional Council tested for bacteria indicators in Te Henui at 11 locations from Baker Rd (in the country) down through the city to East End.

Of nine sites away from the mouth, only two - one near East End Bowling Club and one off Welbourne Tce - exceeded the 280 red line that raises alarm, but many weren't that far below, and in its report the council mentioned septic tanks as a possible cause.

So far as I know (and I researched this extensively in 2014-15 for a book on Taranaki's waterways) nothing more has been done about it, even though national standards suggest "routine monitoring" should be done by TRC.

So, this question: are those old septic tanks still discharging?

I know a bit about the septic tank of today. When Lin and I built a house on Waiheke Island late last century we needed a complex system with a sizeable field of soakage trenches and other things to ensure nothing found its way off the property. My old family home had nothing like that.

The government is moving inexorably to higher standards to force dairy farmers to take even greater steps to stop water pollution. It feels it can do that because the political risk is low.

My concern is urban areas are also culpable for several reasons, including old septic tanks and dodgy effluent pipes. Will a Labour-dominated government take equally tough steps against people who may be its political supporters?

You know I like irony, so here's something I found in TRC's 2012 report on Te Henui – bacteriological results from the two upstream farmland test sites were among the lowest found.

FOOTNOTE: Thank you to reader Barb, who has suggested I try micro-fibre body cloths in the shower. The cloths exfoliate dead skin without use of soap or gel.