

Save Our Harbour FAQ Sheet

What's happening with the Health of our Harbour?

This FAQ sheet has been developed to help you complete a submission to the NRC regarding the WDC Application to Change Condition 16 of Consent 200404352(02). Submissions close on the 4th of February and must be sent to the NRC as well as a copy to the WDC. A sample submission has been drafted which you may also use.

What's happening with the WDC application to the NRC regarding consent to discharge raw sewage from the Okara Pump Station into the Whangarei Harbour?

In late 2007 the WDC applied to the NRC to discharge up to 24,000 cm of raw sewage from the Okara Pump Station directly to the upper harbour . This application was to renew a consent which has been in place since 1996.

At the time the Whangarei community learned of this they became concerned and alarmed at the desecration and fouling of Whangarei Terenga Paraoa. Over 600 submissions opposing this application were received by NRC.

The application to discharge from Okara Pump station is currently on hold and the WDC are indicating they may withdraw this application altogether.

This shift has come because of a decision by the WDC to add a second pipeline and upgraded pumps to transfer extra waste water from Okara to the waste water treatment plant (WWTP). WDC believe this should greatly reduce raw sewage discharges from the Okara pump station into the Whangarei Harbour.

However as there will be increased waste water sent to the WWTP they now require a change in the existing consent to be able to discharge greater volumes of barely treated waste water to Limeburners Creek into the Upper Harbour. In effect they are shifting the problem from Okara to Limeburners.

What are Save Our Harbour's concerns about this latest application?

Moving the problem downstream

The application seeks to expand extreme bypass maximum volumes from 90,000 cubic metres per day to 140,000 cubic metres (largely untreated). All waste waters over 57,000 and up to 140,000 cubic metres per day will only go through primary treatment and then directly discharged into Limeburners Creek. So in effect, during wet weather events, we could see up to 83,000 cubic metres per day being discharged into the upper Whangarei Harbour.

Primary treatment does not remove bacteria and viruses that are harmful to anyone using the upper harbour for swimming, recreation and shellfish gathering. The Upper Harbour waters will still be unsafe for use, as they are now. The WDC is directly responsible for the deterioration of the upper harbour water quality. We rely on the NRC to uphold the Coastal Bathing standard, and – until the standard is met – to decline this application.

Overflows into Harbour now commonplace – not infrequent

The original consent for the WWTP was based on the understanding that the extreme wet weather bypasses would be temporary and infrequent. This is not the case at all. And now, Okara (with its upgrade and second pipeline), not to mention future climate change, will likely add more bypasses.

The 45 overflows that the WDC reports last year cannot in any way be said to be infrequent, necessary. They are systemic failures of the system. In effect the harbour was closed for all of 2009. We have started 2010 already with a raw sewage discharge into the harbour resulting in a closure for four weeks.

Inflows and infiltration

Preventing extra water getting into the system is the biggest challenge to resolving overflows. One of the main reasons the Whangarei system is failing is because of water from above ground getting into the waste water network. One illegal roof connection (stormwater flooded into the wastewater system) equates to 40 times the volume of normal household waste water.

If council removes the volumes entering the waste water system by inflow, and continues to monitor such inflow on a regular basis, the existing system does have the capacity to deal with normal waste water effluents (even allowing for infiltration problems within the storm / wastewater pipe systems).

A focused attention by WDC on reducing inflow – and this is not presently a focus – would have significant effects on incoming volumes of waste water.

Water quality concerns

We don't accept the defeatist attitude that the water quality of the upper harbour is already so compromised that this further contamination doesn't matter! Tangata Whenua, communities, water users, all have strong expectations still that the water quality should be improved, and that discharges into the Harbour should not further compromise water quality. Even the Council's rhetoric around the 'ultimate living environment' and its approach to projects like the weir proposal implies that even WDC has not given up on Harbour water quality.

Cultural Impact

The continued desecration of the Harbour waters is a real offence to local Tangata Whenua, who have over many years opposed the discharge-to-water approach to sewerage systems. Now, as in the past, Whangarei Terenga Paraoa has been relied upon as a food basket for the people; in these tough economic times this food source needs to be protected. The fouling of the Harbour is also a cultural offence to the majority of the community, an economic disincentive, and more. We note that cultural offence to Tangata Whenua has been the grounds on which the Environment Court has declined other applications in Northland before.

Council serious about water quality?

Council is still planning to seek permission to dump 35,000 cubic metres per day into the Waiarohia Stream, as an integral part of the current strategy. Similarly, the plan to dump largely untreated sewage directly into Bream Bay is well to the fore in Council planning. Neither of these interventions indicate a serious intention by Council to stop discharge of sewage to water, and to address the core problems in any significant way.

What should WDC be doing?

Whilst we have a council that has an outstanding application to discharge to Waiarohia, plans for direct sewage outfall into Bream Bay, and continued raw sewage discharges outside the planned upgrade area – we have a council that is not taking this issue seriously.

Council's intentions and commitment beyond immediate interventions are vague. The immediate responses are technical and limited – a crisis response but little more. There is no indication of an effective strategic approach to the problems. There is no mention of further funds nor a clear process beyond 2012. In practice, as has been the case before, this will likely mean that Council does nothing beyond the immediate interventions (we note that the conditions of consent of the 1996 consents about waste water discharge have yet to be met).

Ideally the application should be denied. However if the application be granted it is important that other stringent conditions be attached to the consent. See the attached sample submission that we encourage you to use or adapt.

Public protest and increasing public awareness has made the WDC take some action. They have partially addressed the issue. We now need the community to demand the council to go further.

We made a difference last time we can do so again!

Healthy Harbour Healthy People!
Ka ora te moana, ka ora ate iwi!