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Where do the parties stand? Protecting water sources and drinking water quality

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ELECTION 2023 Where do the parties stand?

Summary

The government inquiry into Havelock North's campylobacteriosis outbreak warned that nearly 800,000 New Zealanders are drinking water that is "not demonstrably safe".[1] This included risk from water-borne infections and hazardous contaminants in the water. Furthermore, more than 80% of New Zealanders consider the state of our water to be their main environmental concern. With climate change, existing impacts will be amplified.

So how proactive will the next Government be at protecting water sources? All parties responded to our survey question on water source protection with varying amounts of commitment to the specific question around nitrogen contamination. The disparate nature of the parties' responses suggests very different understandings of what is driving the country's drinking water and wider water quality problems.

There are complex connections and interactions between land use, sewage, waste and drinking water infrastructure, the roles and responsibilities of public agencies, and existing policies. (See links to previous work here.) Without well-designed regulation, and clear roles and accountability for authorities, we will continue to see degradation of water sources and public health crises in communities.

Political party policies on nitrogen fertiliser and source water protection

In recent decades, manufactured nitrogen fertilisers have become the dominant source of nitrogen in NZ agricultural production. The use of manufactured (or "synthetic") nitrogen fertilisers in NZ has increased more than 600% since 1990.[2] Along with an increase in irrigation, this fertiliser use has enabled the intensification of farming, including large increases in the numbers of dairy cows. For example, the number of dairy cows has increased ten-fold in Canterbury and 16-fold in Southland since 1990.[3] This expansion has put huge pressure on waterways, including drinking water sources. The urine of dairy cows is a primary source of nitrogen pollution of water.[4] It has contributed to breaches of national drinking water standards for nitrate (a form of nitrogen) in water supplies for some communities.

Additionally, in 2016, as a result of contaminated drinking water, the people of Havelock North experienced a campylobacteriosis outbreak. An estimated six to eight thousand people became ill, and 42 people were hospitalised, with three developing long-term health conditions, and four dying.[5] The outbreak occurred when a poorly-maintained municipal bore became contaminated with sheep faeces, following a period of heavy rain.[6]

The government inquiry into the outbreak stressed that, "protection of the source of drinking water provides the first, and most significant, barrier against drinking water contamination and illness." [1] Source water refers to the bodies of water from which we take our drinking water. This includes groundwater, rivers, lakes, springs, and reservoirs. Despite the inquiry's findings, source water remains vulnerable in NZ.[7]

Our first question to the political parties asked:

"Will your party implement regulations such as 'sinking lid' caps on the use of nitrogen

fertiliser and revised National Environment Standards for human drinking water sources to clearly delineate source water protection zones?”

We then asked:

“Please expand on what further policies your party will introduce to protect the sources of NZ’s drinking water”.

The responses from the parties are summarised in the Table below (see the Appendix for the full responses).

Political party	Summary of response (see Appendix for the full response)	Fertiliser	Source water protection	Additional policies
ACT	Supports a regulatory authority that sets science-based drinking water standards and verifies compliance of those standards by local drinking water infrastructure entities.	Not answered.	Protection of local aquifers, etc. are best dealt with at local level to comply with drinking water standards.	No further information provided.
Te Pāti Māori	Since 2020, have been campaigning to phase out nitrogen fertilisers. Introduced a Member’s Bill that would prohibit the extraction of freshwater for selling in packaged form.	Phase out in five years and support farmers to transition to regenerative, organic and value-add agricultural practices.	Prevent extraction of freshwater for bottling.	Top priority is to honour Māori customary, proprietary, and decision-making rights. As kaitiaki, the protection and restoration of drinking water must be led by tangata whenua.

Political party	Summary of response (see Appendix for the full response)	Fertiliser	Source water protection	Additional policies
Green	Need to strengthen the regulation of nitrogen in waterways and work to restore waterways by preventing highly polluting land uses and controlling freshwater pests. Give effect to Tino Rangatiratanga by supporting hapū and iwi to give effect to Te Mana o te Wai.	Phase out synthetic fertiliser.	Implement dissolved inorganic nitrogen limit. Ensure implementation of Te Mana o Te Wai. Ensure Taumata Arowai (the drinking water regulator) has resources to be involved in land-use planning.	Establish a regulatory framework and funding to give effect to tino rangatiratanga of hapū and iwi over waterways in their rohe. Create a fair system for commercial water allocation that opposes large-scale irrigation projects.
National	Repeal and replace Three Waters. Restore council ownership and control of water infrastructure while improving water quality and ensuring financially stable water services.	Not answered.	Not answered specifically.	Full policies to come before the election.
Labour	Making substantial progress on implementing the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management, delivered in 2020. Seeing behaviour change brought about by rules on intensive winter grazing. Not perfect but practices are improving. Stock exclusion regulations are in place.	Fertiliser use has dropped by 5% per annum in the past 2 years as a result of the per annum fertiliser cap they introduced in 2020, and new software tools.	Regional councils are to deliver their regional plans consistent with the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management by the end of 2024.	Full policies to come before the election.

[Update 18 Sep 2023] Since publication of this Briefing, there have been new policy announcements that are covered in our final review of the series available here.

Comment

What stood out was the disparate nature of the parties' responses, with quite different characterisations of what is driving the country's drinking water and water quality problems.

Labour, the Greens and Te Pāti Māori identified land use and agriculture as upstream pressures on water quality. In contrast, National and ACT focused on downstream regulatory tools to manage water quality problems. National only discussed water services, avoiding comment on nitrogen fertiliser or other land activities. ACT focused on drinking water standards as the primary regulatory lever for improved quality drinking water (as we highlighted in an earlier Briefing, drinking water standards have had limited effect).

Governance and decision-making were a strong focus for four out of the five parties. The Greens and Te Pāti Māori identified the need for tangata whenua to lead decision making in their rohe. National and ACT both stressed local decision making, (presumably by councils). Based on ACT's public comments outside our survey, it seems likely that they do not support tangata whenua leadership on water.[8] National's position is less clear on this, and Labour has been publicly supportive of co-governance models.[9]

Responses indicate a limited understanding of interactions between authorities involved in the protection of water. The Greens highlighted the need for the national drinking water regulator, Taumata Arowai, to be involved in regional decision-making. No other party mentioned the drinking water regulator explicitly, though ACT did mention drinking water standards which Taumata Arowai is responsible for. No party mentioned Havelock North's outbreak or its inquiry that found regional councils had been remiss in their duties to protect drinking water sources.

What is striking, particularly from the two main parties, is the lack of a cohesive, confident vision for moving to more sustainable, healthy land use. Primary risks to drinking water sources are agricultural pollution and over-extraction of water for irrigation. Furthermore, Cyclone Gabrielle very recently demonstrated how poor land use can impact water services following heavy rainfall events (e.g. silt and forestry slash damaging infrastructure). National did not mention land use or farming practices at all. While Labour did, it appeared focused on incremental rather than transformational changes. The Greens noted a need for a fair allocation of water use and that they do not support large-scale irrigation schemes (a driver of intensified land use). Te Pāti Māori was the only party to identify the need to support farmers as they redesign their farming systems to have less impact.

No party mentioned climate change, which is projected to amplify existing issues with water quality and resilience of water infrastructure.

Protecting the quality of water for the health of communities and the natural environment

requires an understanding of the interactions between land use, infrastructure, climate change, and governance by central and regional agencies. Too narrow a focus from the incoming Government will mean more risk for communities from water-borne disease and hazardous contaminants in water.

What this Briefing adds

- Political parties in NZ characterise the risks to drinking water and water quality very differently and some didn't directly answer our questions.
- Some parties have a very narrow approach to protecting water sources and ensuring safe drinking water. For example, they don't consider Māori perspectives, or threats such as agricultural intensification and climate change.

Implications for public health policy and practice

- For protected drinking water sources and good water quality, NZ needs political parties to have comprehensive and cohesive strategies that take into account central and regional authorities' roles, governance, infrastructure, land use, and climate change.
- Given the importance of water protection, there is a need for citizens, independent experts, and the media to pay particular attention to this aspect of political party policies.

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Appendix: Full responses from the five political parties to the survey

The questions we posed were:

- Will your party implement regulations such as 'sinking lid' caps on the use of nitrogen fertiliser and revised National environment standards for human drinking water sources to clearly delineate source water protection zones?
- Please expand on what further policies your party will introduce to protect the sources of NZ's drinking water.

Responses below (as provided by 6 July) are in randomised order.

ACT Party

Question 1 (regulations such as ‘sinking lid’ caps on the use of nitrogen fertiliser for drinking water)
Question 2 (further policies to protect drinking water sources)

ACT supports a regulatory authority that sets science-based drinking water standards and verifies compliance of those standards by local drinking water infrastructure entities. Protection of local aquifers etc are best dealt with at a local level to comply with national drinking water standards.

Te Pāti Māori

Question 1 (regulations such as ‘sinking lid’ caps on the use of nitrogen fertiliser for drinking water)

Yes. Since 2020 Te Pāti Māori has campaigned for phasing out nitrogen fertilisers within five years. We also have policies that support farmers to transition to regenerative, organic and value add agricultural practices.

Question 2 (further policies to protect drinking water sources)

Our top priority is to honour Māori customary, proprietary and decision-making rights. As kaitiaki, the protection and restoration of drinking water must be led by tangata whenua.

Co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer has introduced a Member’s Bill that would prohibit the extraction of freshwater from aquifers, groundwater, and waterways for selling in a packaged form.

Green Party

Question 1 (regulations such as ‘sinking lid’ caps on the use of nitrogen fertiliser for drinking water)

Yes - Our freshwater is under serious threat from polluting industries, such as intensive dairy businesses and forest logging. Our awa, lakes, wetlands and estuaries are taonga – and must be treated as such. The Green Party will strengthen regulation of nitrogen in waterways, including by phasing out synthetic nitrogen fertiliser, and implementing a dissolved inorganic nitrogen limit.

Question 2 (further policies to protect drinking water sources)
We will:

1. Work to restore degraded waterways through preventing land uses that lead to pollution and proactively controlling freshwater pest species. We’ll establish a regulatory framework and funding to give effect to tino rangatiratanga of hapū and iwi over waterways in their rohe and ensure the implementation of Te Mana o te Wai.

2. Among other regulatory changes, create a fair system for commercial water allocation

that opposes large-scale irrigation projects.

3. Ensure Taumata Arowai has resources to be involved in land-use planning and consenting to prevent activities that degrade our water sources.

National Party

Question 1 (regulations such as 'sinking lid' caps on the use of nitrogen fertiliser for drinking water)

Question 2 (further policies to protect drinking water sources)

National will repeal Labour's failed Three Waters and replace it with Local Water Done Well – National's plan to restore council ownership and control of water assets while improving water quality and ensuring water services are financially sustainable.

National's full suite of policies will be released prior to the election.

Labour

Question 1 (regulations such as 'sinking lid' caps on the use of nitrogen fertiliser for drinking water)
Question 2 (further policies to protect drinking water sources)

Our manifesto is not yet confirmed, and we will continue to outline our policy in this area closer to the election.

However, we are making substantial progress implementing the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management we delivered in 2020. Regional councils are working hard to implement their plan changes to give effect to the Statement and they must be promulgated by 31 December 2024.

We are seeing behavioural changes brought about by rules on intensive winter grazing. It's not perfect, but practices are improving. Stock exclusion regulations are also in place.

Greater care with the use of fertiliser, caused in part by the per hectare per annum nitrogen fertiliser cap, coupled with new software tools developed by industry, have seen synthetic nitrogen fertiliser use drop by 5% per annum for both of the last two years.

Appendix 2 - Previous discussion of source water and public health

This issue has been covered in our previous Briefing on land use, drinking water, and regional and central regulatory authorities: "When the first barrier fails: Strengthening protection for drinking water sources." We've also written about how regional planning and central government policies like the NZ Emissions Trading Scheme impact on communities' waterways. Climate change is likely to amplify existing problems for communities with vulnerable water infrastructure, as demonstrated by the devastating effects of Cyclone Gabrielle.

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