

Rangitikei River Forum - Notes from the Inaugural Forum Meeting

Mayor Chalky Leary, Rangitikei District Council welcomed people to the forum, and introduced Chris Shenton, Chair for the meeting.

Chris Shenton, Chair – Setting the scene

Chris provided background on the formation of the Rangitikei “Path to Wellbeing” Environment Theme Group (Theme Group), and that this group had developed the idea of creating a Rangitikei River Forum. The Theme Group had been formed resulting from a conference held by Rangitikei District Council on the six community outcomes contained in the Council’s Long Term Plan.

Generally involvement in environmental issues has been adversarial due to Resource Management Act (RMA) processes, and the forum presented an opportunity for the community to come together in a different way. Historically there has been a lack of accessibility to information, and clarity of what the key environmental issues are.

Rangitikei River is seen as a barometer of our environmental wellbeing. Biodiversity is an important issue, and there is lots of good work going on locally, such as that done by the Rangitikei Environment Group on the control of Old Man’s Beard. It is often felt that agriculture is made the scapegoat, and this is a key challenge.

We need greater understanding, education and communication. However, *anything we do needs to have a strong level of commitment and be community driven*. Initiatives that come from the ground up, that are community driven take both time and commitment to work.

Where people choose not to get involved, and the work still needs to be done, the initiatives can be driven through regulation – but this can limit the options for people and communities in the future.

The Theme Group has been meeting from time-to-time and has made limited progress. It was decided recently that the two priority work areas (Rangitikei River, Biodiversity) would be combined together, and would focus on work in, on and around the Rangitikei River.

The Rangitikei River Forum is not intended to operate in the same way as the Manawatu River Leaders forum. It is not organisations that are driving the Rangitikei River Forum but people, working from the ground up on what we as a community value, and see as important.

We need all stakeholders to work together and get involved, to focus on the river in itself, because we probably all want the same thing – a sustainable river environment – whether that is economically, socially, culturally or recreationally (or a combination of these factors).

We need to extend opportunities to work together – current projects, new projects, and joined up/strengthened resources.

From my perspective, we want to be involved, as Iwi, and are in a good position to do so. It will become increasingly important for other iwi in the District as well as they make their way through and out the other side of the treaty process. More people will be involved over time because of this.

What would success look like for the Rangitikei River Forum. My view is that there would be a measurable improvement in the state of water quality and biodiversity, plus meeting the cultural, social, economic and recreation wellbeings of our community.

Technical panel:

Maree Clark – Environmental Scientist, Water, Horizons Regional Council

Horizons monitor water quality at seven “State of the Environment” monitoring sites (Rangitikei at Pukeokahu, Rangitikei at Mangaweka, Rangitikei at Onepuhi, Rangitikei at McKelvies, Hautapu at Albasters, Hautapu upstream of the Rangitikei confluence and the Porewa at Onepuhi Rd) and 8 major point source discharges (Taihape STP, Bulls STP, Halcombe STP, Sanson STP, Hunterville STP, Marton STP, Ohakea STP and Riverlands industrial wastewater) within the Rangitikei catchment.

These sites are monitored by Horizons once per month for a number of water quality parameters including nutrients, faecal contamination (*E.coli*) and sediment. On the same day this monitoring is undertaken the four monitoring sites on the mainstem of the River (Pukeokahu, Mangaweka, Onepuhi and McKelvies) and the Moawhango at Waiouru are monitored for periphyton biomass and percent cover. Continuous monitoring of physico-chemical stressors and turbidity is undertaken at some of these sites. A subset of these sites are bio-monitored annually to determine the Macroinvertebrate community indices.

Ecoli is not a major issue – the targets are met a large percentage of the time, however in the lower reaches it is poor.

Soluble inorganic nitrogen is problematic around Taihape and the lower reaches, with similar issues with dissolved reactive phosphorus.

Between 2005 and 2011 the invertebrate life in the waters around Taihape has gone from good to poor. Excessive periphyton growth (green algae) had reduced habitat availability, displacing both invertebrates and other plants, reducing the life supporting capacity of the river, and reducing dissolved oxygen.

What are the key causes of water quality degradation?

- Point source sewage discharge
- Intensive farming
- Hill country erosion
- Industrial discharge
- Septic tank discharge/leaking, seepage.

The report on Point and Non-point sourced nutrient loads can be found here:

http://www.horizons.govt.nz/assets/horizons/Images/one-plan-tech-reports-public/nutrient%20loading%20technical%20report3%20-%20final%20draft_Jemmas%20edits.pdf

WaterQualityMatters

<http://old.horizons.govt.nz/default.aspx?pageid=376>

Fleur Maseyk – Senior Environmental Scientist, Ecology, Horizons Regional Council

There are 7 ecological districts within the Rangitikei District – which makes the district really interesting in ecological terms:

- Hill country
- Beech forests
- High country
- River terraces
- Kowhai forests
- Podocarp/Broad leaf areas
- Sand dunes/coastal areas

Prior to human settlement in the District, predictive modelling suggests that there were many different habitats and complete forest cover. There has been considerable loss of habitat variation and vegetation cover within the catchment. Outside of the Department of Conservation managed areas there is very little indigenous vegetation remaining.

There are two key reasons for the decline:

Historic: land clearance to create settlements and land that can be used for production

New challenges: Invasive pest species (both plants and animals), such as smothering plants like Old Man's Beard (only one of a large number of invasive species found in the Rangitikei).

Human activity and surrounding landuse does continue to have a detrimental impact on indigenous biodiversity, although this is not of the same magnitude as was experienced in the early days of human settlement. Although, the primary driver of decline is now pests and weeds, the small areas we have left remain extremely vulnerable to landuse pressures.

Aaron Madden – Environmental Coordinator, Biodiversity, Horizons Regional Council

Horizons have limited resources to invest in biodiversity protection and control, and we try to prioritise these resources so that we get the best use out of the limited resources.

An example of what we do is protection of native habitats that contain rare and threatened species. For example, we have recently found some native mistletoe – we get very excited when we find this!

We evaluate whether a site is worth protecting, and undertake a threat assessment. Where stock have had access to a bush block, stock graze the understorey and you can see right through out to the other side. The problem is that there are no young plants to come through and replace the older ones.

One of the common measures we take is to reduce stock access (through fencing the area), and then work on pest and weed control. Old Man's Beard is one weed species, but there are about 300 others that we also need to consider when managing a bush block. We have to assess the viability of being able to control the invading species. We have also had some experience with inappropriate weed control by well meaning people – which has potentially done more damage than the weed would have if left untreated.

Jason Roxburgh, Area Manager Manawatu-Rangitikei, Department of Conservation

The Department of Conservation is a central government organisation with two primary roles in the Rangitikei:

1. Publicly owned land – biodiversity management
2. Recreation provision within publicly owned land

The Department's primary job is to deliver the policy of the government of the day. From time-to-time that necessitates a change in tack. DoC's biodiversity management and control is largely focused on the management of its own areas within the DoC estate. Pest and weed control on private land is undertaken by the Regional Council and/or private land owners.

At a local level the DoC team is made up of 19 staff who cover an area that stretches from up the Napier-Taihape Road through down to Otaki. The three people based in Mangaweka are primarily working on plant and animal pest control, and most of this work is undertaken in the Rangitikei River Catchment itself. Key species targeted are Old Man's Beard, Barberry and White Briony. White Briony is only found in two areas of NZ, and this is the Rangitikei and Te Kuiti. It is a national priority to eradicate this species. DoC deliver this eradication programme locally on behalf of MAF biosecurity.

DoC currently has a 6000ha project at the northern end of its estate to control predators and for the protection of whio and kiwi.

DoC also has a community relations function to educate the public. A large proportion of this time is spent engaging with Councils over district or regional plans. As there is a limited pool of funding, DoC has to carefully prioritise resources, and that can attract criticism of what it is not doing. As an organisation, we probably don't do enough to tell people the good things that we are doing well within our current resources.

Gary Massicks, Agricultural Consultant, Stantiall and Keeling

The modern day farmer is typically a family based business with some children and some staff involved. There are a few farms that are becoming the larger corporate owned and manager operated model, but these are still only around 1-2% of farms.

The land is a vital asset, and farmers recognise this – the vast majority look after their land really well. Many are in the situation of being asset rich and cash poor. The return on investment is terrible – in the region of 3-9% for dairy and as low as 1-4% for sheep and beef, although sometimes up to 9% in really good years.

Agriculture exports make up 71% of total exports - \$33 Billion out of \$41 Billion, and therefore it is the backbone of our economy. Fonterra employs some 11,000 staff in NZ, and paid out \$16 Billion last year to farmers. Those farmers and contractors went on to spend 50% of that back in their community.

The Rangitikei catchment probably has three distinct land types –

- Volcanic ash (hill country, intensive cropping)
- Steep hill country (extensive hill country)
- Alluvial soils (cropping, finishing, dairying)

There is no doubt that as farmers we have an impact on the environment. Nitrate leaching, soluble inorganic nitrogen, phosphate. Nitrogen impact from cows is much greater than from sheep. From deer there is very little. Phosphate comes from slips or erosion – as it is found in deep soils. Methane is the other big issue.

There have been some really positive advances in environmental practice –

- Significant advancement in effluent treatment
- Clean streams accord
- Carbohydrates to dairy cows (maize silage, grains) reduces nitrogen
- Horizons – farm strategy on hill country, new rules on dairy conversions
- Tree planting on marginal land
- Riparian planting
- GPS spreading
- Nitrification inhibitors
- Greenhouse gas consortium
- Fertiliser cooperative training

Looking towards the future, the world wants and needs more food. Should we produce more food to feed more people? In New Zealand we do it cheaper and better, and we don't say this enough. There is also lots of research being done in New Zealand that will benefit the rest of the world.

One key message I'd like to leave you with – we need to take care of the land, the asset. If we improve it, it is better for agricultural production and profitability. If we wreck it – it is unsustainable.

Keynote Speaker

Alastair Cole, Regional Coordinator, NZ Landcare Trust

NZ Landcare Trust is an organisation that advocates environmental management of private land. We specialise in integrated catchment management and environmental education. Landcare trust is a Non government organisation with our board of trustees comprising “green” groups, pro-farming groups and iwi. There are seven regional coordinators throughout NZ.

Integrated catchment management

- Collective approach – catchment based
- Long term sustainability
- Catchment management can enhance property values, measures may be able to be subsidised
- Also enhances resilience, in line with industry and environmental standards
- Image – enhances property values

Integrated Catchment Management success comes from community involvement; having community support and community champions to increase interest; getting people to talk and interact; assisting land owners to find solutions that they take ownership of.

An example of this is the Aorere Catchment. The interest was triggered by needing to do something to address shellfish industry concerns i.e. Ecoli contamination. The solution was to form a catchment group of diverse and interested stakeholders. The key achievements were a unified community, sustainable farming, 14 voluntary farm plans and improvements for the shellfish industry.

In the Rangitikei Catchment there are pockets of concerning river pollution. How could the Aorere River case be implemented in the Rangitikei?

- Share a passion/vision for the future
- Make a plan of action
- Source funding

Mike Ploughman (HRC Councillor) commented on presentation – Believes forum needs to have an established water baseline quality measure established in the near future. Ruapehu has reasonable water quality. The mountain is naturally rich in phosphate.

A regional standard applies to the region, but communities set the standard. In Waiouru Ecoli is a problem. In Taihape, discharge is significant, and contributing to the problem. Ruapehu is concerned about the spread of Old Man’s Beard.

Community Panel

Jo Rangooni, Rangitikei River Users Group

Community empowerment and involvement are the key to action. Having a diverse group of stakeholders has sometimes made progress difficult, but progress has been made. The group meets monthly to determine practical projects to undertake.

People are encouraged to read a document produced by Massey University that contains a significant amount of information on the Rangitikei River. It is more Bulls specific (lower reaches of the Rangitikei) but still a very useful document.

There is not a lot of water in the lower reaches of the river over summer, and this makes recreation activities difficult, and therefore impacts on recreational use. I recall as a kid being able to easily swim in the river all year round. Not so easy to do now.

Jim Howard, Rangitikei Environment Group

The key focus of the group is the elimination of Old Man's Beard, a smothering invasive weed that can engulf whole areas of bush if left alone to do so and it destroyed a large stand of kahikatea trees north of Taihape this way.

Originally the group was supported and funded by the Rangitikei District Council to control this weed on Council land. It took a lot of time and effort to get the commitment from the council and to get the group into action, but it shows that it can be done. Horizons and WINZ now provide some funding, and we are seeking extra funding for our work and will continue to work collaboratively with the Councils.

John Flenley, A Rocha, Palmerston North Branch

A Rocha is a Christian based group that works collaboratively with communities on a number of projects. The organisation operates in 20 countries. The name is derived from a Portuguese word meaning "the rock". There are 6 A Rocha groups operating in New Zealand.

Done some great projects, such as in Kenya encouraging new industry in eco-tourism rather than deforestation. In Palmerston North the focus is on tree nursery propagation (currently do 2000 trees/yr, have capacity to increase to 10,000). There are two main planting sites – Pitt Park and a farm in Pohangina Valley which will become a QEII reserve.