

## **Akaroa wastewater proposal short-sighted and ill-conceived**

**Environmental group Friends of Banks Peninsula want the Council to rethink their plans for the seaside settlement. Sue Church reports.**

Akaroa's wastewater woes need to be tackled properly, with a focus on the longer term impacts of climate change and sustainability.

What the Christchurch City Council is currently promoting – and will be making a final decision on at their December 10 Council meeting – doesn't reflect any of these. It's a short term, short sighted view that might look good on the surface but actually has a woeful effect on the Banks Peninsula environment in the longer term.

At an estimated cost of \$68 million, the Council wants to proceed with what's known as the Inner Bays Irrigation scheme, which would pipe Akaroa's treated wastewater to a massive storage pond at Robinsons Bay to irrigate native plantings on three sites close to homes and streams in the Robinsons Bay and Takamatua communities.

Since the Peninsula came under its orbit, the Council has struggled to resolve the thorny issues of relocating the Akaroa wastewater treatment plant from the culturally sensitive site of Takapūneke (at the southern end of the town) and the discharge of treated wastewater into the harbour. Tikanga Māori requires that mauri must be restored to wastewater through land contact by irrigation or wetlands before entering a water body.

*"Climate change and Covid-19 are game changers"* says Christchurch City Council in its Long Term Plan advertising. *"We must tighten our belts and focus on what's important. Sensible decisions need to be made now so that our children and grandchildren aren't unfairly impacted further down the track"*.

It seems this is largely lip service since neither costs nor climate change figured in the recent Hearing Panel's brief deliberations on the third round of consultation on the issue. Instead the panel largely rubber-stamped the staff's favoured proposal - a hugely expensive, intrusive and high risk land-disposal system. Submitter's arguments about tightening belts, focusing on what's important and thinking about future generations were completely ignored. The many risks associated with this proposal raised by submitters were brushed aside.

Two earlier rounds of public consultation by the Council have already failed due to technical issues. In the first, geotechnical testing conducted after the consultation found the steep slopes proposed for irrigation were slip-prone and unsuitable. In the second, it was found that the proposed new system had been sized on incorrect data - the true volume of wastewater was double what Council had believed it to be, largely due to the excessive infiltration of ground and storm water into the poorly maintained sewer network.

Fixing Akaroa's broken pipe network was an absolute priority for submitters this third time around, including the Ngāi Tahu parties. The volume of wastewater would be reduced by 60% if storm and ground water infiltration ceased. This, in turn, would reduce the size of the treatment plant and land required, the cost, and the effects on neighbouring communities. It would also remove the risk of raw sewage overflows, which pose the greatest threat to human health and the environment.

Friends of Banks Peninsula, our long-standing environmental group for the area, received a standing ovation from the crowd gathered at the Akaroa hearings for their submission proposing a staged system based on a Reduce-Reuse-Recycle model. The plan is to first reduce the volume by fixing the broken pipes, and wait until this has been achieved before constructing a smaller (therefore less expensive) system to treat the wastewater. This would incorporate wetlands to provide land contact to restore mauri. Initially, it proposes running the highly treated water through Akaroa in a purple pipe re-use system to provide non-potable water for activities such as boat washing, flushing toilets and watering gardens. Later reverse osmosis treatment would be added, bringing the water up to a potable standard so that it could be used to replenish Akaroa's streams below the town's water intake. Eventually, once legislation allows, the potable water could be returned above the water supply intake to supplement the drinking supply.

This plan would take no longer to implement than the Council's proposal and would take advantage of central government funding initiatives. It would result in a wise investment, resolving all of Akaroa's water issues – leaking sewer pipes, wastewater disposal and water shortages – creating future resilience to the increased storms and droughts brought by climate change. We must solve these issues in a comprehensive way to serve future generations when investing in such expensive and long-lasting infrastructure, or we will saddle them with a costly white elephant and ongoing issues.

Friends of Banks Peninsula and the local community are urging Councillors not to adopt the Hearing Panel recommendation and instead focus their efforts on a pragmatic, forward-looking solution. All Christchurch ratepayers will be paying for the new Akaroa system, and at a staggering \$68 million (equating to \$82,500 per connection) the current proposal is one of the big-ticket items in the Long Term Plan.

This is a much bigger issue than just Akaroa. Implementing a cost-effective solution that creates future resilience by treating water as the precious and valuable commodity that it is would set a precedent and create a model for addressing New Zealand's unique cultural issues around wastewater. Now, more than ever, we must not waste our most valuable resource and our scarce funds.

- Sue Church is secretary of environmental group Friends of Banks Peninsula.