

# Mainlander

Pakeha say it is a pragmatic health issue. Maori say it goes deeper than that. It's a spiritual concern. John McCrone looks at why a new wastewater treatment plant for Akaroa is causing such a problem.

## Raising a stink

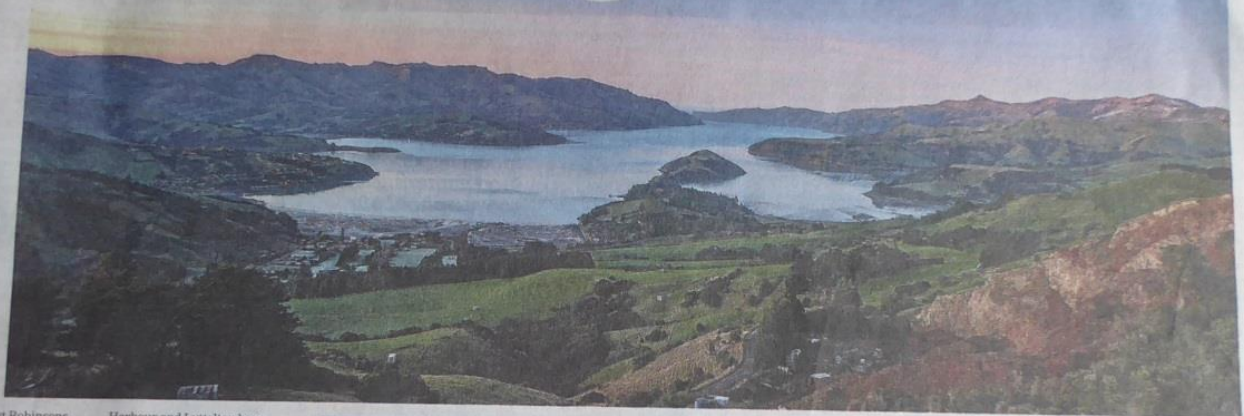


PHOTO: JOHN McCRONE FOR THE PRESS

**T**he first Robinsons Bay resident Sue Church knew of it was when a drilling rig turned up on farmland next to her property in September.

"That was how we realised something was up - when McMillan Drilling arrived with its machinery to do some soil testing on our back doorstep, about 40 metres from the house over the creek."

The thing is that Christchurch City Council (CCC) has a sewage disposal dilemma.

A 2015 Environment Court ruling confirmed that Maori sensitivities about the traditional Pakeha practice of piping spent dunny water out into estuaries and harbours - the cultural harm that does to kai gathering - means the whole of Banks Peninsula is having to rethink its sewage systems.

As their ocean discharge consents come up for renewal, every local treatment plant is having to consider ways to switch to some kind of land-based solution for the final dumping of treated wastewater.

Across Akaroa Harbour, in the tiny settlement of Wainui, already the waste from its main subdivision has been diverted to trickle-feed a nearby pine plantation - at some ratepayer cost.

Duvouchelle is looking ahead to the expiry of its own consent in 2023. One option being discussed is to water the local golf course. Governors Bay, Diamond

Harbour and Lyttelton have consents that end in 2018, 2021 and 2029 respectively.

The plan is to combine the discharges of all three in a single pipe that runs through the Lyttelton tunnel - yes, over the heads of passing drivers - right through to Bromley's oxidation ponds.

But Akaroa is the real sore point. The council was thinking it could probably get away with using a pipeline out into the middle of the harbour a little longer there when its consent runs out in 2020.

After all, CCC had agreed - after 30 years of insult to Ngai Tahu and the local Onuku runanga - to shift Akaroa's existing treatment plant from the Takapuneke reserve, the site of a pa and 1830 massacre, over to farmland on Old Coach Rd the other side of town.

With \$33 million being spent on that relocation, plus the promise of a higher standard of water treatment and attention being given to sorting out Akaroa's stormwater overflows, CCC must have believed it was doing enough to appease any iwi health fears.

But at a mid-2015 consent hearing in which Ngai Tahu was powerfully represented, the council was knocked back and told to investigate a more radical land-based alternative for Akaroa too. Find some fields to dump it all in.

And so - like some heavy-footed monster stalking the landscape - the Akaroa scheme has been spreading angst and alarm as it has been forced steadily to look further and further out for a



Friends of Banks Peninsula view paddocks in Robinsons Bay where a wastewater pond could go.

PHOTO: FRIENDS OF BANKS PENINSULA

**"We have strong winds here. It's going to blow around. And its going to have viruses in it; pharmaceuticals, hormones, heavy metals, etc."**

Robinsons Bay resident Sue Church

suitable disposal site.

Church, spokeswoman for the newly created Protect Robinsons Bay residents group, says Takamatua Peninsula was the first

place to come under council scrutiny.

The budget that had originally been allowed for a new pipeline was about \$6m. So Church says - councils being councils - officials were looking for a land option that would come in at about the same public cost.

The Takamatua headland was closest - just a short step from the proposed new treatment plant in Old Coach Rd - even if the irony is that Takamatua residents are on septic tanks and wouldn't themselves benefit in any way.

Church says CCC was also pushing for a spray irrigation system that would allow the wastewater to be used to grow stock feed on about 30 hectares of leased or purchased farmland.

"It's the cheap option because

Takamatua wondering for the past year if they're going to have their property taken off them. That's been a very stressful thing to have to live with."

However, soil testing has now shown the headland is too prone to slips. Saturating the ground would be dangerous. The council has had to start looking further out to Takamatua Valley and, after that, Robinsons Bay.

That is when the drilling rigs rocked up in September. And, naturally, two more communities are now up in arms.

Protest placards appeared by the roadside over Christmas. Through organisations like Friends of Banks Peninsula, residents have hired their own engineer, Andrew Daker, to do expert reports.

Church says if we are talking cultural sensitivities, council pool sprayers within 25m of your home don't seem particularly acceptable either. Likewise, the prospect of land being taken under the Public Works Act.

One Robinsons Bay resident, Julian Calcutt, could be left with a 3-hectare wastewater holding pond on the flat paddocks next to him near the state highway, according to some of the proposals.

"So we are preparing in case we do have to take it all the way to the Environment Court, but we're hoping it doesn't get to that," Church says.

With Waitangi Day rolling around again, and the Iwi Kijwi rhetoric ratcheting up nationally, it is

perhaps surprising that more isn't being made of the cultural dimension of the Akaroa pipeline decision.

As the ruling by Environment Court commissioners David Collins and Hosni Leungsbury makes clear, even CCC didn't really get it for a long time. Discussing the legal outcome over a coffee near his home in Governors Bay, Collins explains that for local iwi the issue is black and white.

Any kind of disposal of human waste to open water is unacceptable, no matter how highly treated. It is not a pragmatic health issue, but one of spiritual values.

Maori customarily exploited the rich food resources of Banks Peninsula's coastal waters. On Akaroa beach, whata were set to dry tuna and shark. Gockle, pipi and crabs were collected.

And that, as elsewhere, led to a strict tradition of not contaminating the mauri, or life essence, of the sea with human waste. As iwi representatives told the hearing, all effluent has to pass first through the soil, the land, to be considered properly purified.

Collins says Ngai Tahu got frustrated because council kept coming up with halfway solutions - like coastline infiltration galleries and wetland basins that would let wastewater seep slowly back into the harbour.

This would remove any last nutrients, heavy metals and pathogens safely.

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# Raising a stink

Continued from C1

"But for Iwi, it's all or nothing." Collins says it is the same for the Governors Bay scheme. Modern waste treatment produces perfectly safe discharge.

"We have a 1.6km pipeline here with a big diffuser at the end. And the effluent coming out of that is actually in many ways as clean as the rest of the harbour." But Collins says you can't deal with Maori concerns by focusing on the practical health questions when what is at stake is a matter of tribal tapu.

And New Zealand's treaty settlement means that is backed up under the Resource Management Act (RMA). Protection for culture and heritage is written in, along with health, amenity and other values.

Collins says with the addition of both national and regional policy statements on coastal water, Maori rights in this regard are now well entrenched. "The [treaty process] has come out with a very clear statement against sea outfalls – traditionally our easy way to get rid of excrement."

The RMA still allows for a reality check, he says. If there really is no other choice – perhaps for health or landscape reasons – then a pipeline could be allowed. But CCC was turned down in Akaroa because it couldn't show it had in fact exhausted the search for a land-based option.

Collins says he is sympathetic that it might have taken council engineers some time to get the message. It is a big change in New Zealand habit to use land disposal.

But already it is happening. Rotorua uses forestry blocks. Ashburton uses the plains. Southbridge has a spray system on a few hectares. A Burnham piggery trickle-feeds a nearby pine forest.

And around the world – where reclaimed water has real value – there are comprehensive "purple pipe" systems where wastewater is recycled for communities to water their gardens and flush their toilets.

So it can be done. CCC just has to do the investigation to find an



Environment Court commissioner David Collins. Pipeline consent was declined because of cultural values. PHOTO: JOHN MCCORMACK/STAFF NZ



Panoramic view. Maori object to any wastewater disposal direct to sea, especially in an enclosed harbour. PHOTO: JOHN KIRK AND SCOTT HARRISON/NZ

approach which has general community acceptance. "The onus is on the council here to prove it has no alternative."

But what about the possibility Maori are claiming to care more about ocean outfalls than they really do? Maybe this is a power move – a nice way of getting back at the Pakeha system?

Collins says the evidence at the hearing was impassioned and extensively researched.

One Onuku elder described how it was his life's work to fight

the council's original decision to site Akaroa's sewage ponds at Takapuneke – sacred ground because of a tragedy, and so as culturally offensive as it gets.

And look at it the other way round, says Collins. The legal system requires Maori to draw a black and white line where sea outfall ceases to be a spiritual problem. And asked that question, the honest answer has to be that nothing that was flesh unparried by land should reach the water at all.



Waitangi Day celebrations at the Omuku marae in Akaroa in previous years. PHOTO: DEAN KOZANICH/STAFF NZ

Craig Pauling, Maori strategic adviser for environmental planner Boffa Miskell and a former Ngai Tahu researcher, says he helped study Maori beliefs around waste management practices for the 2010 Tiaki Para report undertaken by Landcare.

Pauling says it is not as if Maori are just making it up. The prevention of pollution of mahinga kai, or coastal food-collection areas, is a key aspect of Maori heritage and identity.

Pauling admits historically there was some latitude. Waste was discharged to waterways. But in strictly controlled fashion. For example, using a paepae hamiti (a longdrop at a pa).

"I'm talking from a longdrop, over the edge of a cliff, effectively. That was a traditional method. But it would be downstream of where you get food, or in an area of longshore drift which took it away from food-gathering areas."

And then Akaroa and Lyttelton harbour, are the kind of enclosed bays that make any kind of direct wastewater outfall unacceptable.

Pauling says Pakeha tradition is almost based on water as a cleansing force. Well, settler Christchurch did have its original land-based solution – night soil carts that emptied out the city's longdrops into the sand dunes.

**"It's a human value surely to protect your food chain. A lot more Maori depend on food gathering and so we uphold our traditions. But wouldn't it be great as a region to tell tourists and visitors that we don't discharge our waste into Akaroa Harbour?"**

Craig Pauling, Maori strategic adviser for environmental planner Boffa Miskell and a former Ngai Tahu researcher

Pauling concludes.

But plumbed toilets are designed to swish waste away out of sight, out of mind. Leave it to the sea and the fish. It is likewise a cultural preference. Maori have the opposite view – that land is instead the proper way to purify human waste.

And the distaste felt is real, says Pauling. Hood is tapu as well as faeces. So used tampons are another issue.

He says in Maori culture it is important to be able to welcome others to the table with locally gathered food. It is the basis of hospitality and mana.

"So even discharge of treated sewage to water is an issue. There's a spiritual value attached to that waste that makes areas of food-gathering ungatherable because of the beliefs of tapu."

Like religious proscriptions around eating pork or other beliefs, the argument against pipelines may be cultural, but hardly trivial.

And Pauling says many Kiwis will agree that it is just not a nice thought – not in keeping with our supposed 100 per cent pure national image – to continue the primitive practice of dumping waste to sea.

"It's a human value surely to protect your food chain. A lot more Maori depend on food gathering and so we uphold our traditions. But wouldn't it be great as a region to tell tourists and visitors that we don't discharge our waste into Akaroa Harbour?"

"A land-based system – especially if you can use it to irrigate forests or non-food crops – is a good outcome. It's something we could all be proud of," Pauling concludes.

Where to next for CCC? The council says it has filed an appeal against the Akaroa pipeline decision – reserving the right to fight the case on grounds of practicality if it eventually needs to.

Meanwhile, it is deep in the tricky process of investigating all land disposal possibilities and the consultations with potentially affected communities.

In their most recent public presentation in Akaroa, council officials said that in Robinsons Bay they are considering both spray irrigation for pasture and drip irrigation to trees.

At \$5.7m for watering a forestry block, that would be even cheaper than a \$6.7m pipeline. Pasture comes in at \$7.3m. Although exact costings are still being determined.

CCC says for Takamatua Valley, even a forestry block solution is in fact looking impractical. The available sites are too scattered and any scheme needs room for large storage ponds as well.

Officials revealed the council is also now looking at a \$11m to \$15m option of pumping Akaroa's wastewater right over the hills, 10km in a pressurised stainless steel tube, to an isolated farm on Pompeys Pillar, facing the ocean far from any other habitation.

Or a fourth answer, at \$16m to \$20m, is to send the waste by trenched pipe under the harbour to Waimai, adding to the irrigation happening already on council land there.

After public feedback and tighter costings, some time after March, council will have to make its decision and go for final consent.

In response, Friends of Banks Peninsula says this is too fast. It is calling on CCC to delay consultation until April to give itself time to develop fully costed and investigated proposals for all the alternatives.

The 2020 consent deadline may be looming. But there is danger the council table could pull the trigger too quickly on a difficult choice.

So the heavy-footed monster may land in Robinsons Bay as the cheapest current answer on offer. Or it could be forced to stomp off over the horizon to a location that is politically more palatable, if also considerably more expensive.

In a few years' time, Akaroa's wastewater dilemma might be marked solely by one of those mysterious pipes to nowhere and a suspiciously lush hillside which can be seen only from a passing fishing boat.

Lyttelton tunnel will have its new aqueduct too. Duvatichelle maybe a few extra flowerbeds around the golf clubhouse.

Eventually, even the consent on Christchurch city's own Bromley sewage plant – upgraded in 2008 with a \$87m outfall pipe to get wastewater out of the estuary and 3km away into open ocean – will come up for renewal.

That could get interesting if the push develops for a land-based alternative to that as well.

But for the moment, the focus is on Akaroa. And how the council navigates the tricky cultural waters is being keenly watched from all sides.