

Hon David Benson-Pope

Minister for the Environment



4 August 2006

Speech Notes

Speech for Water Forum held at the Christchurch Convention Centre

Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to speak to you today – and thank you for your hospitality and company last night.

The effective management of water quality and availability is a priority for this Government. Water is fundamental to our economic development and the New Zealand way of life. The range of uses and values in water is broad and together we face the challenge of meeting these needs now and for the future.

In May, you heard about the Government's decisions on water. The Sustainable Water Programme of Action Ministerial Advisory Group is now up and running and will meet later this month. Jim Anderton and I will report back to Cabinet in March next year on progress with the Programme.

We're also working towards launching the Water Awareness Campaign later this month. While New Zealanders love their water bodies, not everyone understands the importance of acting now to manage them sustainably. Last night I was glad to be able to give you a sneak preview of the campaign, and the feedback seems positive.

There's plenty for us to do before March next year, and collaborative events like this forum help give focus and impetus to our work.

We will get the best results through collaboration and partnership. In March you heard from the Prime Minister at the Central Government – Local Government

Forum about the fundamental role local government has in working alongside central government to achieve the strategic goals of economic transformation; families young and old; and building national identity. Effective water management is integral to achieving these goals.

Jim Anderton talked last night about the importance of, and in some cases, urgency for water management to evolve with changing economic and environmental circumstances. The Sustainable Water Programme of Action is about working with local government to reach a common understanding on how we can achieve a more integrated and flexible management framework for water.

It's not about changing the good work that councils are already doing – it's about endorsing and supporting it. This forum is part of achieving a strong working relationship with you – we are committed to making it work.

We already share many of the same principles and goals for water. Many Long Term Council Community Plans have identified water quality and non-point source pollution as priority issues. And there's a lot of common ground that has been identified at this forum already.

I know that yesterday you asked for central government actions to add value. I agree. The water programme will have failed if it requires more cumbersome processes. I heard of your concerns about the costs of litigation over technical methods and what that litigation does to your regional plans. I'm confident that the water programme will assist.

Agility was raised yesterday. Do you have the tools to respond quickly enough to emerging challenges? If not, what can Government do to provide you with the agility you need? The spirit of the water programme is not to send you back to the drawing board on issues you are already addressing, but to provide you greater ability to address the upcoming issues.

*I understand one size does **not** fit all. We are not advocating that. We want to make the policy framework suit your local situation and community. I also acknowledge that improvements will take time. At the same time I want to be convinced that cumulative effects can be adequately managed.*

I have high expectations that this common understanding will be cemented today and that we will jointly move on to the next step – the workable solutions we all need.

When we talk about national direction on water demand, it's not a top down "one-way street". We need to think collectively about how national tools could support local management. National direction can complement and endorse the innovation and expertise of local government, water users and communities.

As an example, some water users are trialling the use of telemetered water metering which enables the measuring of "real time" water use.

We've begun work on developing a National Environmental Standard, which will endorse the effective use of water measuring devices. We aim to assist councils in gathering accurate and useful information for managing water resources. This is how I'd like to see national instruments being framed and used.

And it's the same when I refer to national policies on water quality. A national policy statement could set national outcomes and goals for water quality but still leave room for a mix of tools and solutions to tackle the local issues.

This flexibility is required to address the specific local challenges for different catchments and water bodies. Some catchments are at immediate risk from land use. Others have outstanding natural values that need to be protected. We are lucky to have many pristine water bodies, New Zealand rivers are of high quality by international standards.

But we can't afford to be complacent. There is increasing concern about quality and competition for use. In most cases it's our lowland streams that are the focus – and I commend councils for the work that's going on to clean up water bodies that are in poor shape.

Local innovation is driving these improvements through partnerships with land-owners, community groups and industry sectors. Initiatives include farm management plans, on-site advice, and riparian planting. I would like to highlight two current examples of effective collaboration.

With the Dairying and Clean Streams Accord we are seeing significant changes in land management. Targets for the exclusion of stock from streams and the bridging of streams have been exceeded. Local government and the dairy sector have shown great commitment to making the Accord a success.

In the Taupo catchment, excellent progress is being made with a programme assisting land-owners to transition to low nitrogen-emitting land-uses and management techniques. It's a collective programme between land-owners, local government, Ngati Tuwharetoa, and central government.

Joint funding of \$81.5 million has been committed by central and local government, underpinned by Environment Waikato's regional rules that will cap nitrogen emissions at pre-2004 levels.

We want to endorse and support this locally-driven work throughout the Sustainable Water Programme of Action.

There's good reason for managing water locally to reflect the local conditions and aspirations of communities. I regard this as a strength of our system. The challenge for us today is to identify how we plan and provide for national aspirations and goals through our local management system.

The RMA itself is a good piece of legislation, and we want to be able to use it to its best effect. We need to consider how best to do this, either through minor changes or through encouraging and disseminating best practice.

Councils already have a good toolkit for managing water issues in their regions. I was encouraged to learn recently about Environment Canterbury's Restorative Programme for Lowland Streams involving a staged review of over 600 groundwater consents. Tackling over-allocation as well as managing water in the face of changes in climate is a huge challenge for the Canterbury region.

So in many cases it's a matter of getting access to information, expertise and in some cases funding to develop and implement the solutions. The best solutions might be "best practice" or other forms of guidance which can be shared. We need to target solutions to the different challenges of specific catchments and water bodies. Part of this is identifying sensitive and at risk catchments, as well as identifying water bodies of national outstanding natural value.

We need to know which water bodies are at greatest risk from changes in land-use. We also need to have a clear picture of our pristine water bodies with national outstanding natural value that need long-term protection.

Although these projects are to be developed on a national scale, we want to work collaboratively with local government and communities.

A collective role for all of us is to make the links between related projects on water, climate change adaptation, flooding and forestry to achieve whole of catchment solutions. It is also important to clarify the roles and responsibilities for catchment management.

We want to engage more with you to provide a clearer understanding of the challenges facing the country in catchment management, and to seek better opportunities for integrated solutions.

As an example, when we talk about identifying the appropriate form of national direction we can look at the linkages between policies to address water quality and other environmental issues. Policies to plant more trees for example, may have many possible advantages such as helping to clean up our waterways, encouraging biodiversity, and increasing the number of carbon sinks for green house gas emissions.

This forum is an excellent opportunity to discuss your views on the role of central government and how it complements the responsibility you have as primary managers of freshwater.

Today we are at a cross road for the future management of water. We have the opportunity now to ensure that the value of water is fundamental to decision-making on our economy and lifestyle. The opportunity actually to deliver for New Zealanders the security, the economic growth and the clean environment they expect and deserve.