

***Improving our freshwater – it’s up to us...!***

This year’s Eastbourne Winter Series got off to a riveting start with a presentation on freshwater by *Choose Clean Water* spokesperson Marnie Prickett. Her idealism and commitment to the cause of improving the quality of our waterways was a clarion call to all those present.

She presented us with some sobering facts. Only 30 per cent of our rivers are swimmable. Twenty-three per cent of our monitored groundwater sites are now too polluted with pathogens for human consumption. Seventy-four per cent of our native fish are threatened with extinction – they could all be gone by 2040. Forty-four per cent of our monitored lakes are eutrophic or worse.



What has happened to our beautiful place, she asked, when signs like “*Caution – water quality borderline for swimming. Best advice is to stay out of the water and avoid eating lake fish*” or “*Health warning – this waterway is polluted. Swimming is not recommended*” are becoming all too common?

Quoting the Māori whakatauki “*Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au*” (I am the river and the river is me), she said many tāngata whenua now thought *they* were dying, along with their rivers.

Last year, the Government said swimmable rivers were “impractical”. However, following public pressure, they have now set 2040 as a ‘swimmable’ rivers target. To achieve this, all it had done was to “lower the bottom line for nitrate toxicity”, Marnie said. Its new “A” standard for swimmable rivers (where the estimated risk of campylobacter infection is less than 50 cases in every 1000 exposures) was in fact its former “C” standard. This meant the former ‘wadeable’ category was now classed as swimmable. Marnie described this as “a cynical move”.

Many people were not aware that the Government’s focus was just on the really big rivers and lakes. This meant 90 per cent of rivers were not covered by the policy. “There is no bottom line at all for most of New Zealand’s waterways,” Marnie said.

The OECD was also critical about changes to our environment, suggesting our growth model, “*largely based on exporting primary products, has started to show its environment limits, with increased greenhouse gas emissions, diffuse freshwater pollution and threats to biodiversity*”.

Marnie agreed with Environment Minister Nick Smith that water quality issues affected both urban and rural areas.

Despite all this bad news, Marnie said we should not feel demoralised. "We can find solutions and we can work together on this."

A *Freshwater Rescue Plan*, backed by eight organisations, including *Forest and Bird*, the *Tourism Export Council*, *Choose Clean Water* and *Greenpeace*, offers a seven-step initial plan:

- 1) Set strict and enforceable water standards
- 2) Withdraw all public subsidies of irrigation schemes
- 3) Invest in an agricultural transition fund, i.e. redirect the \$480 million of public money earmarked for irrigation to more environmentally friendly farming methods and the restoring of damaged waterways
- 4) Implement strategies to decrease cow numbers immediately
- 5) Instigate polluter-pays systems nationally
- 6) Regional councils should be expected to produce quarterly reports on improving water quality, to show how they are monitoring breaches
- 7) Develop a long-term vision for transitioning to a low-carbon, greener economy.

Where we go from here, Marnie said, was up to us all. All of us can choose to speak up about these issues, to write to MPs or newspapers, to get in touch with like-minded groups (e.g. the Friends of Hutt River) and to stay in touch.

Winter Series co-ordinator ***Anne Manchester***