

Inside an Iwi

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For the environment's sake

Last week there was a three-day hearing by two independent environmental commissioners for the resource consent application of the Far North District Council relating to discharges from the east coast wastewater treatment plant. The FNDC has been in breach of its consent there for almost a decade, and those most affected by that are the tangata whenua of Ngāti Kahu.

Since the plant was installed almost four decades ago, its 'treated' wastewater has flowed into the sea at Aurere. During that period we have suffered the total disappearance of kokota and karehu and the shrinking in size of the pipi there. We have also experienced bouts of sickness from eating the tio, which have black spots on them, the kutai, which are almost entirely black, and the wetafish caught there, which often have cancerous growths on them.

At the same time we have witnessed an explosion of sea algae that now regularly wash ashore to rot, and a matching explosion in manawa (man-grove) forests, a sign of excess nutrients in the water and nature's way of trying to clean up.

Understandably, we have become wary of taking kaimoana from or near Aurere. However, it is still one of the main kapata kai of our iwi, and our staple diet still revolves around kaimoana. So, depending on what our senses tell us, we do still take from there.

As submitter after submitter noted last week, we have a spiritual connection to our whole environment and a



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whakapapa relationship to every creation within it. That is why we have never practised the discharge of human waste material into our waterways when sensible land-based alternatives have been available.

During the past decade, while both FNDC and Northland Regional Council have effectively ignored the ongoing problems with the plant, and the rest of FNDC's inadequate sewage infrastructure throughout the district (except Kerikeri), tangata whenua have worked on providing them with viable land-based alternatives. After lengthy, in-depth research and testing (none of which was paid for by the FNDC or NRC), the most attractive of these alternatives to date is an electro-coagulation unit.

Following a two-year trial at a local enterprise, which is now investing in a permanent, larger unit to deal with all its wastewater, evidence of the unit's efficacy and its economy (much cheaper than the existing system) has been provided to both councils via the current hearing process. And yet I witnessed and heard last week a distinct coolness from both councils toward it.

The commissioners were empathetic with us, but are constrained by legislation. So I think they will likely issue a consent for FNDC to continue discharging to water. However, I think they will make it a much shorter-term consent than the original 45 years sought by FNDC, and will also make it conditional on consulting meaningfully with tangata whenua and exploring land-based alternatives.

For the environment's sake, I hope so.