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KAITAIA'S WATER SITUATION – THE FACTS

Kaitaia residents need to work harder to conserve water – but the Northland Regional Council will ensure there is enough water available to service essential town supplies despite the ongoing drought.

Council Chairman Mark Farnsworth says allegations the Regional Council is putting environmental concerns over the state of the Awanui River ahead of the wellbeing of the town's residents and the security of Kaitaia's water supply are simply untrue.

He says unless the flow in the Awanui River drops to such a level that it is physically impossible for equipment to draw off any water, the Regional Council will allow the Far North District Council to continue to use it for town supplies, provided reasonable efforts are being made to conserve water.

"Staff at the FNDC have been told this very clearly on a number of occasions in recent times and I'm at a loss as to why there is any confusion on the FNDC's part. Clearly our message has not got through at a political level."

Mr Farnsworth says the Regional Council is already allowing the Far North District Council to take considerably more water from the Awanui River than its resource consent conditions allow. In fact, under the terms of its consent it should have stopped taking water from the critically low river completely several weeks ago.

But he says Regional Council rules allow for areas like Kaitaia to draw water well beyond minimum resource consent limits in times of drought as the Regional Council gives a higher priority to protecting public health than environmental concerns.

"However, as there are inescapable environmental impacts from taking water from a river as critically low as the Awanui now is, any permission to take water for town supply comes with a rider."

"That rider is that yes, the FNDC can take water for essential town supplies, but it must also demonstrate that it has implemented significant water conservation measures and that people are making a serious effort to save water."

Mr Farnsworth says water conservation – or the lack of it - is at the crux of the Kaitaia issue, along with the poor state of the town's water supply infrastructure, which the drought has simply highlighted.

"The Far North Mayor has said publically that they are only asking us to allow them to take a little bit more - we're saying with just a little bit more of a saving, what they're already taking should be more than enough."

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He says even with the restrictions the NRC has already imposed, Kaitaia residents are still effectively being allocated more than 300 litres of water each per day.

“That’s more than many parts of New Zealand which are not afflicted by drought allocate to their residents.”

Mr Farnsworth says the FNDC’s own figures show that until recently, Kaitaia residents appear to have made little real effort to conserve water and that daily use figures had remained largely unchanged from the 3200 cubic metres of normal unrestricted water use there.

“While FNDC has for some weeks now been publicly promoting water conservation, until last week, FNDC and the Kaitaia water users had made little or no reduction in use; petrol station car washes were still operating, people were observed waterblasting, irrigating bowling greens and using hoses etc.”

He says as of today, Kaitaia’s water reservoirs were still about 80% full and water use was at about 2650 cu m a day, plus 150 cu m a day used for water treatment plant filter back washing, a total of 2800 cu m.

“Basically, if just slightly less water was used, there would be sufficient water to operate the public supply safely, meet demand and comply with the 2600 cu m water take limits the NRC currently has in place for the river.”

Mr Farnsworth says complicating the FNDC’s woes is that the normal alternate source of town supply, the Kauri dam, has once again fallen victim to a toxic algal bloom rendering the many millions of litres of water in it useless for town supply.

He says the Regional Council has long held concerns over the state of the FNDC’s public water supply infrastructure and an FNDC consultant’s report had indicated that up to a third of the water the District Council treats is ‘lost’ in Kaitaia’s water system.

Mr Farnsworth says the Regional Council had raised the water infrastructure issue with the FNDC on a number of occasions, including via submissions to the FNDC’s Long Term Council Community Plans in 2006 and again in April last year.

Similarly, the Regional Council had written to major consent holders – including the FNDC – in early December last year warning of potential drought-related water shortages. **(MEDIA, A COPY OF LETTER IS ATTACHED SEPARATELY).**

That letter urges the Council to plan for possible water shortages, including alternative supplies or instigating water rationing plans if necessary.

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Mr Farnsworth says the FNDC has had a number of opportunities to plan for the situation it now found itself in and was merely trying to deflect attention from the fact it had not done so.

He says at a staff level, workers from the Regional and Far North Councils are in constant contact on a daily basis and have implemented an adaptive regime to deal with the supply issues.

“However, I think it’s fair to say the people of Kaitaia are not interested in bickering over who’s responsible, they just want reassurance that their essential water needs will be met. The Regional Council is happy to give them an assurance that it will do everything within its powers to allow for that and provided they come to the party and use water responsibly, I’ve every confidence we’ll get through this together.”

Meanwhile, Mr Farnsworth has sounded a note of caution that with the drought showing no signs of abating, other parts of the Far North including Kawakawa and Opononi/Omapere may soon find themselves in a similar situation to Kaitaia.

ENDS

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