

## **State of rivers ‘worse than people realise’**

**Rising nitrate levels, the world’s highest rate of endangered species: the state of New Zealand’s rivers is much worse than many people realise, a river ecologist says.**

**“It’s quite depressing, as a river ecologist, giving these talks,” said Professor Russell Death at a public meeting in Selwyn on Thursday.**

**“Things are just getting worse and worse every time I give one.”**

**Death was talking to a packed room about the region’s waterways, which have become a matter of increasing public concern.**

**Over several decades studying rivers, Death’s primary interest has been in the life living within them. They were like a canary in a goldmine for overall river health, which was in a perilous state around the country, he said.**

**“ We have the highest percentage of endangered freshwater fish in the world, we have some of the most polluted rivers in the western world,” he said. “Much of the water quality in New Zealand now is so low that even if it improves dramatically it’s still going to be very poor. We’re in a bad state.”**

**The issue was that unlike some overseas countries – where polluted rivers glowed with radiation, or even caught fire – the pollution here was largely invisible.**

**He urged the audience not to look towards the Government for answers – its clean water package, announced earlier this year was “quite bad” and “next to useless”.**

**He said the issue was not as complicated as some tried to make out: there were too many cows, producing too much nitrogen through their urine.**

**“The nitrate levels in (Canterbury’s) water ways are far higher than amount anywhere in New Zealand and it’s almost getting to the point that they’re so high it’s hard to know what to do about it. It’s a really bad situation.”**

**The health implications of increasing nitrate levels were expanded upon by Dr Alistair Humphrey, Canterbury medical officer of health. Midwives had become “the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff” in parts of Canterbury, responsible for ensuring pregnant women did not drink water polluted with nitrates from their private bores.**

**Humphrey said regional targets were not being met: nitrate levels in groundwater were supposed to show a demonstrable decrease by 2020, yet recent results showed the vast majority had levels either increasing or not decreasing.**

**Nitrates were an indicator of other issues, such as microbial contamination, which could have serious health effects.**

**“Here in Canterbury we’ve seen nitrate levels going up and up and up in our groundwater,” he said.**

**“The implications if we don’t meet our targets – and we are not meeting our targets in Canterbury – is that we will see more sickness, we might see people dying.... we’ve already seen people dying.”**

**“We’re not doing very well, and we’re not even hitting the target we set ourselves. At least we’ve set targets, but we’ve got a long way to go – it could take many decades before we reverse this problem.”**

**He said the regional strategy had been “fantastically successful” in meeting irrigation targets, if not groundwater quality targets.**

**Farm consultant Dr Alison Dewes said there had been an enthusiasm for chasing GDP growth, without recognizing the environmental costs of increasing production on farms.**

**“We don’t measure the cost of pollution,” she said.**

**“As you keep intensifying, what you do get is a big, rapid spike in the environmental effects. The cost to fix those environmental effects become very significant beyond a certain stocking rate or a certain level of inputs.”**

**Farmers were being pushed to increase their volume, which benefited processors, but not necessarily farmers. “Our farmers are pushed to produce more. Our main dairy processor is building more capacity, there’s more stainless steel. There’s a need for that business model to have more growth and more output.**

**“In reality, profitability on farm doesn’t necessarily come from more production. So what’s good for the processor isn’t necessarily good for the farmer.”**

**Rick Burke, a Bay of Plenty farmer representing the Farmers for Positive Change group, collaborative processes had been taken over by industry, which should have been removed from the process. “What’s happened is big business has cosied up and bullied regional**

**councils, hijacking what should have been a collaborative process which should have been with farmers and stakeholders,” he said.**

**“Big business has been allowed to influence our regional council and help craft policy to push their own corporate interest”.**

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