

## **Hokianga Health Enterprise Trust**

### **Presentation to NRC Hearing Committee**

#### **FNDC Ōpononi/Ōmāpere & Kohukohu Wastewater Treatment Plants**

**APP. 003839.01.03 & APP. 002667.01.04**

**May 2023**

Tēnā kōrua, tēnā koutou katoa.

My name is David Mules. I am here today as Deputy Chairperson of the Hokianga Health Enterprise Trust to speak to this hearing, in the hope that the health and well-being of the people of Hokianga will be given prime consideration by the Hearing Committee in relation to these two applications.

I am an elected Trustee representing the communities served by the Panguru Health Clinic. My past experience includes training and employment as a civil engineer specialising in water resources, as a teacher and principal in rural area schools, and in environmental and conservation management.

The health facilities and services in Hokianga – including our ten community-based clinics and the hospital here in Rawene – are specifically designed and configured to optimise the health and well-being outcomes for our people, and are provided free-of-charge to all Hokianga residents. This unique health service is owned by the people of Hokianga through the Hokianga Health Enterprise Trust, and operates as Hauora Hokianga. This year our Hokianga communities will be celebrating 30 years of being served by our own independent health Trust.

Three-quarters of our almost 8000 registered patients identify as Māori, with the ratio dropping to around 50% for over-65s, and rising to 85% for under-25s.

Central to the effectiveness of our services in Hokianga is our recognition that a person's overall health and well-being is dependent on the holistic inter-connectedness of te taha tinana/physical health; te taha hinengaro/mental health; te taha whānau/collective health; and te taha wairua/spiritual health. While this 'whare tapa whā' model derives from a Māori cultural world view, there would be very few Pākehā, or people from other cultures, who would dispute the ultimate truth contained within this concept.

At a fundamental level, the deliberate discharge by FNDC of human wastes into a waterway which is also a pātaka kai for the gathering of fish and shellfish, a place of recreation and spiritual replenishment, and a place of huge cultural significance, is deeply offensive, and it is contrary to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Quite apart from any physical risk of disease from pathogens, the threats arising from such discharges to the spiritual, mental and collective well-being of our people are real and significant, and cannot be dismissed, nor can they be effectively mitigated. They are pervasive and durable and, in our considered judgement, they have the potential to threaten the quality of the health and well-being outcomes for our people. This holistic nature of health and well-being is not adequately addressed in these applications, an indication of the narrow perspective brought by the FNDC to this fundamentally important consideration.

Hokianga is a special place in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and in the world. Not only is it the tūrangawaewae of the many whānau and hapū who are affiliated to our 40 or so marae – whether

the quarter who live here or the thousands of our whanaunga living elsewhere for whom this is a mātāpuna, their source of cultural and spiritual identity to which they can always return – but also the many other families who have made their homes here in Hokianga over the years. The waters of Hokianga are also the central attraction for our many manuhiri, our visitors with whom we share our manaakitanga, and who help us economically to sustain our lives here. The principle of using the waters of Hokianga to dispose of our human sewage is anathema to te mauri o te wai, and is irreconcilable with these deeper aspects of our lives.

It is imperative that a land-based disposal option is seriously investigated, designed and implemented now, regardless of the technical and financial obstacles which may have to be negotiated.

The FNDC exists to service the needs of our communities, and our mayor and councillors are elected by us, and supported by the rates we pay. In this respect, we consider that the nature of these two applications raises some serious concerns regarding the negligence being demonstrated by our council in relation to the health and well-being of our people.

Let's take a closer look at these:

1. Both of these existing wastewater disposal plants with discharges into the waters of Hokianga were constructed last century as the populations of these communities grew and the shortcomings of their historic septic tank disposal systems became more evident. In those days the levels of political influence and awareness of Maori cultural values at local council level were generally very limited, only a shadow of the better-informed world we live in today with our more equitable diversity in community leadership roles. Within our communities this growing awareness has also been significantly influenced by improved understandings of the Treaty and its implications for both local and central government, and in the maturing of a sense of fairness and social justice for all within our community and national life. However, this is still very much a work in progress!
2. Successive monitoring, research and reporting is helping to inform us of the serious levels of contamination of many of our waterways as a consequence of human activity. The latest, and most concerning, of these reports was released only a couple of months ago. It is clear that we cannot just keep on doing what we have been doing in this regard, and a serious reset is needed. This has direct relevance for these two applications, with the shift to land-based disposal clearly being a pressing imperative for us all. Since the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 applies to the waters of Hokianga, as a receiving environment affected by freshwater, these waters will soon become the subject of a mandatory NRC Freshwater Plan. In the interim, we as a community health advocate are informing the NRC Hearing Committee here and now that our community's vision is for there to be no wastewater discharge into the waters of Hokianga.
3. It is clear that the primary consideration for the council, both when these two wastewater schemes were originally constructed, and again when these current applications were being prepared, has been financial. The social, cultural and environmental values and priorities for our people have received insufficient consideration in this process. Given the specialist role of Hauora Hokianga, it might have been expected that the FNDC would seek discussion with us about these wider community health and well-being implications when these applications were being prepared, but there has been no such approach. We are confident that the Hearing Committee will be well aware of the obligations of the FNDC in this regard, and will

act accordingly, but in our judgement the FNDC application is deficient in this centrally important regard.

4. The ability of councils with small population bases and communities of limited means to provide adequate and affordable infrastructure is a perennial issue, and this has certainly been the case for us here in the Far North. Over the past year or two central government has been signalling proposals for reforming the way in which drinking water, stormwater and wastewater are to be managed throughout the country, with infrastructure costs to be largely transferred to central government, supported by taxation, rather than the unsustainable burden falling predominantly on local ratepayers, as at present. This may well present a new opportunity to financially enable the implementation of land-based disposal systems for these two plants. It is important that the FNDC maintains an open mind to the opportunities which such changes may create for Hokianga. Last year, at the very time when these applications were being prepared by FNDC, our former mayor (presumably with the backing of council?) was an outspoken opponent of the proposed changes thereby, in effect, working against the possibility of land-based disposal becoming affordable for his own communities. We do not wish to see the health of the waters of Hokianga, and hence the health of our communities, being jeopardised as a consequence of personal political ideologies.
5. Similarly, FNDC's current rating policy which dictates that the capital cost of wastewater infrastructure is to be borne by that community which will directly benefit, rather than by district-wide rating, can be seen to be compounding the sense of unaffordability of the more expensive land-based disposal alternative. Being faced with what would, for many, be an impossible increase in the level of rates, the communities involved would in effect be forced into having to accept the cheaper option, and the offensive status quo of waterway discharge would continue and be further embedded into our future. A direct consequence of the effluent being discharged into the waters of Hokianga is that this then impacts widely upon the thousands of people who have a relationship with Hokianga, far beyond the actual focus community under rating pressure to acquiesce to the status quo. It is therefore recommended that those works that are to be implemented as an eventual outcome of these applications should be treated as 'maintenance of the existing wastewater treatment plants' with district-wide rating, rather than 'new capital works' funded by the local community alone. If this is not possible under the current policy, then we respectfully suggest that the policy should be reviewed, as this is an administrative matter over which the FNDC has full discretionary control. It is clear that some of the potential financial obstacles to land-based discharge alternatives that have been identified are, at least partially, of the FNDC's own making. As people of our parents' generation would say – 'Where there's a will, there's a way'.
6. We are currently living in a world of ongoing technological advances, shifting community values and priorities, efforts to reduce the human footprint on the natural environment, climate change imperatives, and increasing awareness of the importance of maintaining and revitalising wild places and waterways and recognising their mauri. In this rapidly changing context, it is clearly irresponsible and, in fact, incomprehensible for the FNDC to think that it is OK to be applying for the maximum term of 35 years for these plants to operate in a largely unchanged format with waterway discharges.

In conclusion, these applications should be granted only for a period sufficient for FNDC to work with commitment towards implementing a disposal system for both of these wastewater plants which will not involve discharge of effluent into the waters of Hokianga. Five years would be a reasonable term to achieve this widely acceptable and durable solution. Every inducement and support should be provided for the FNDC to start making this change now, to ensure that none of us again have to experience a shameful situation such as this, where our council appears to be determined to move in a manifestly imprudent direction, contrary to the overwhelming wishes of its own communities.

This is clearly the right time for a paradigm shift for the FNDC, to display courage and foresight to realise their potential for positive and inspired leadership of our communities into the future, as we face up to the many challenges confronting us as a district, as part of our nation, and as citizens of this planet. We look forward to the day when we can feel proud of our council.

At its core, this change will involve re-establishing and embedding a respectful, reciprocal and sustainable relationship with Papatūānuku, hei oranga mō tātou katoa me ngā uri ā muri ake nei – for the health and well-being of us all, including the generations who will follow after us.