

THE ADVOCATES BAT FOR CHANGE TO LAKE LEVEL REGIME

In May 2008, the Advocates made a submission to Environment Waikato seeking a review of Mighty River Power's (MRP) consent conditions pertaining to lake levels.

Erosion and loss of land and planting around the shores of Lake Taupo are concerns that have been widely expressed over the last 10 years or so. Recently completed reports on shoreline erosion, one by Opus Consultants and one by Beca, suggest that wind factors on the top of the lake being held high by MRP have largely contributed to this problem. To quote part of the Executive Summary of the Opus findings, "Lake level variations and wave run-up have the greatest potential effect on the extent and depth of flooding."

Although MRP have not breached the conditions of their resource consent to keep the lake levels inside a band of 355.85 metres above sea level (masl) to 357.25 masl, analysis shows that the lake is being held at the higher end of this band for long periods, especially over the summer months when there is a greater probability of high winds.

Advocates President Heather Macdonald featured in a lead story in the Taupo Times on 4 April, in which she challenged Environment Waikato to use the provision in the Resource Management Act and review MRP's lake level regime. The provision for such a review is an elective one, and Environment Waikato, who manages MRP's resource consents, must be persuaded, on good evidence, that a review is necessary.

Heather said the Advocates' primary concern is the impact of high lake levels on the river. The river, at its mouth (the delta), instead of flowing freely out into the lake, hits a wall of lake water. This forces the river to lose its energy, drop its bed load of silt and sand, and recede progressively, back upstream. The compounding effect of this is that the lower river loses its capacity to channel and shallows out, and once productive land has become swampland. Sacred burial sites have been decimated, spawning gravel is smothered and

log jams bank up, further reducing the river's energy.

As a result of that lead story, Hydro Generation Manager of MRP, Gavin Williamson, initiated a meeting with the Advocates.

Our initial meeting with Gavin Williamson on 5 May was most constructive and achieved a written commitment from MRP to participate in discussions with the Advocates to determine whether a more refined approach to lake level management might be tenable.

Advocates committee member Dr Stuart Crosbie has been working up a statistically-based alternative lake level model, which will be the focus of our discussions with MRP. Stuart's model does not change the upper or lower limits of the band MRP work within, but introduces the concept of controlling the amount of time the lake is held at varying levels between the upper and lower limits; that is, the distribution of lake levels. Stuart also hopes to access historical lake level and river flow-rate data over the past several decades to establish the extent to which the lake is being held at higher levels at those times when the Tongariro has high flow rates and would, therefore, have the chance to flush itself.

While the Advocates accept that Lake Taupo is of critical economic importance to the nation for securing electricity supply to the North Island, we equally believe that the introduction of a sharper tool for managing lake levels, in a manner more in keeping with environmental protection, is long overdue. We will be advocating that MRP manage the distribution of lake levels in a more natural manner, even if only as an interim measure, until better data is available on how lake levels are impacting on foreshore erosion and, therefore, what additional control measures are warranted.

Until very recently, the topic of lake levels was politically too sensitive to get onto an agenda for discussion at meetings in the region. It is therefore encouraging that we can now at least sit at the table with MRP to talk frankly about the problems and possible solutions.

DIDYMO

The committee continues to use all avenues possible to lobby for rigorous procedures at the ferry terminals and South Island airports for the checking and decontamination of freshwater damp fishing, tramping and hunting clothing, gear and vehicles.

BioSecurity NZ's contract for Didymo checking at the Picton Ferry is about to be negotiated with a new provider, and we expect BioSecurity to establish stringent contractual obligations in order to strengthen procedures on the ground. However, until the same sort of measures are put in place at South Island airports as well, the North Island will still be vulnerable to the transfer of live Didymo cells.

The committee also continues to lobby for the following:

- a New Zealand-wide ban on felt soles for use in New Zealand waters. Fish and Game NZ are to be congratulated for the recent proposal they have put forward recommending such a ban. The Advocates committee has supported Fish and Game's proposal, on the grounds that felt has been shown to be the greatest carrier of live Didymo cells and the most difficult material to decontaminate. A ban will help slow the spread of Didymo and may well prevent other freshwater pests from getting into New Zealand. Incidentally, stealth rubber soles and/or a wading stick provide every bit as much security for anglers worried about safety.

We want the Government to let the public know that it is taking Didymo seriously. The Government's failure to do this to date has been a costly omission. The Government's response to the threat of Didymo has been dismal compared with its response to agricultural pests and pests affecting the honeybee industry or the apple industry. Tourism and New Zealand's highly prized recreational freshwater surely need to be protected too. With the Government not taking the threat of Didymo seriously, New Zealanders and tourists alike, take the message that "she'll be right".

Government could well shift this perception by putting a ban on felt soles and by putting check and decontamination procedures in place at international airports and South Island departure points. BioSecurity and other relevant staff are still not properly trained, and signage is often not in highly visible places and is not sufficient in the information it provides. Disappointingly, border checks are all still very inconsistent and "hit and miss".

It will be of interest for you to know that a computer-modelling programme has been recently designed for determining the quantity and cost of chelated copper required to treat a contaminated river. Results for the Tongariro show that a single treatment of the lower river, from the State Highway 1 Bridge to the lake, would require 900 tonnes of the copper compound, injected at five points, at a cost of around \$1.5m and four or five treatments would be necessary.

Clearly, therefore, treatment for big rivers like the Tongariro is out of the question, and so, although it is now a rather tired phrase, to CHECK, CLEAN, DRY between rivers has never been more important. We have to do all within our power to KEEP IT OUT.

FROM THE SECRETARY/TREASURER

Thank you to all members who have renewed subscriptions.

More members are choosing to pay subs through internet banking using our website, www.tongaririver.org.nz.

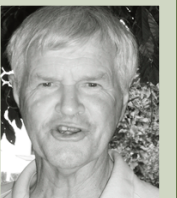
The committee has moved that subs be invoiced. For 2008, I will invoice all members, including those whose subs have lapsed. Invoices will go out shortly after this newsletter is posted and then at the beginning of the 2009 year.

The committee is in favour of publishing a list of members in the Annual Report each year. This would require privacy rights to be acknowledged, and we will seek your approval to publish your name in the Annual Report when you renew your subscription.

Thank you for notifying me of a change of address, the death of a member, or withdrawal of membership. We value our members and wish to maintain an accurate database. Please continue to provide me with updates.

Membership numbers help to give strength to the positions we advocate, and we appreciate whatever you can do to help build our membership base.

Eric Wilson



STOP PRESS

Flood protection from the Major Jones Bridge to Te Aho Road is now complete.

Congratulations to Environment Waikato and Benefields Landscaping for the quality of the end result.

TROUT SIZE NEW LEGAL LIMIT LIKELY



DoC fisheries manager John Gibbs has further revised his earlier recommended change to the legal limit.

Currently 45cm, DoC's initial recommendation has gone from 42cm, down to 40cm. Once formalised, this change will take effect from 1 July, the start of the new Taupo fishing licence season.

The reason DoC gives for the change is that as the fish are maturing later in the season, those caught by boaties in the lake over summer are too small to keep and are damaged by catching and releasing.

The poor condition of trout continues to concern many anglers, and no one seems to know why the decline in condition is occurring. There seems little doubt, however, that there is a food problem of some sort, as so many trout are long and skinny, with reports of empty stomachs.

Committee members are meeting again with the DoC fisheries manager and team in the next few weeks, to discuss these concerns and what might be done. In the meantime, we have put to John Gibbs, for consideration, a discussion paper developed by Richard Kemp containing suggestions for addressing the problem.

Visit the Advocates' website to view the discussion paper, www.tongaririver.org.nz

