

THE ONE PLAN – LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Tom Bowen

Horizons Regional Council, Palmerston North

Email: Tom.Bowen@horizons.govt.nz

Horizons' One Plan was pioneering. It largely foreshadowed the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management (NPSFM) in its integrated approach to catchment management and in limiting diffuse nutrient losses. But perhaps in no other region has a statutory plan occupied so much public and media attention.

Most of the plan works. It is *one plan*, that covers land, air, water, and coast; biodiversity, infrastructure, natural hazards, and te Ao Māori. Issues are largely associated with how diffuse nutrient leaching from intensive land uses is managed. These challenges notwithstanding, less nitrogen is being lost from paddocks and making its way into our rivers and lakes. Farmers accept the need for change, and many are proactively engaged in improving their environmental performance.

In many ways, the One Plan illustrates the difficulty of innovating under the Resource Management Act – and perhaps in any regulatory setting. Plan-making processes are lengthy, for good reason: regulation must be well-considered. Innovation, however, carries with it the risk of failure: we need to be able to adapt if a new approach (like nutrient management) doesn't work as intended. The planning system makes this difficult.

The One Plan was always a first step toward integrated management. The target catchment approach illustrates this, focusing on some activities in some places. It was always meant to be reviewed at some point. That point has come more quickly than anticipated.

The One Plan's nitrogen leaching maxima were intended to deliver on the plan's water quality objectives in a way that was achievable on most farms through good management practice, and by providing appropriate timeframes where large changes were required (Policy 5-8(a)). We believe that position remains appropriate – and that shifting from it, in any case, would require input from the community.

In putting the intensive land-use rules into practice, we've found that the plan doesn't achieve that balance.

This situation creates uncertainty that is difficult for everyone – landowners, council, and environmental advocates alike. Our intention is to resolve this as swiftly as we can. We believe it will require a plan change.

At the same time, we need to take stock more broadly of our approach to freshwater management. We need to respond to what we have learned, locally and nationally, in the years since the One Plan was developed. This is not just a question of how we allocate nitrogen, but of how well all of the measures we have in place align to deliver the outcomes our communities want. The NPSFM adds rigour to that process, more tightly connecting interventions to in-stream objectives.

There is also the question of where, when and how we should use regulation. As a statutory plan, the One Plan may try to do too much. It lists non-regulatory methods, but doesn't direct them very well. Because it is a statutory plan, the One Plan can't be easily updated to reflect changing circumstances – so any coordinating focus it provides across a wider programme of work is quickly lost. Ultimately, the One Plan is just one plan. Just one tool to try to deliver a result, alongside grants, education, and catchment care groups.

As a region, we need a clearer focus on what we, together with the community and stakeholders, are doing in particular places to deliver particular results. We believe this is best achieved through a set of non-statutory catchment plans. Those plans can be much more dynamic, and much more integrated. They would provide direction for changes we need to make to our regulatory tools.

We have come to the conclusion that those catchment plans must be developed collaboratively if they are to be successful. The reason for this is that there is no correct or comprehensive solution to freshwater issues. The challenge is as much social as it is technical: there are multiple perspectives on what 'the problem' is; it is more or less impossible to reduce all of them to a definitive problem statement. Institutional arrangements, group dynamics, and individual values and behaviour are intrinsic to 'freshwater management': people's actions determine outcomes. The goalposts keep shifting: national regulations, public perception, emergent properties. Science will of course remain crucial, but cannot be expected to provide the whole answer. Freshwater management, in short, is complex.

Social process thus has to be a core part of the solution. Not only to draw in different perspectives and information sources, or to get people engaged, but because our management approach will need to organically adapt over time. Building trust in the process and enduring relationships is essential.

Looking to the future, Horizons remains committed to improving water quality. We need to reconsider how well we're using the various tools at our disposal – this is likely to mean less of a heavy focus on regulation and the One Plan. We intend to run inclusive catchment-based processes that recognise that the social dimension of environmental management is as important and complex as the biophysical dimension.

The One Plan will evolve through that process to reflect the changing state of our knowledge, and the changing circumstances of our catchments and communities.