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'Wet nursed' over water

by Lee Scanlon

Westport consumers are being "wet nursed" over water problems country people have dealt with for years, says Buller's Deputy Mayor.

Rosalie Sampson told yesterday's Buller District Council meeting she was pleased Westport's water problems were at last being addressed.

But she said Westport businesses were overreacting to the council's boil water notice, which comes into force on Monday.

The notice will stay in place during a three-week, \$143,000 upgrade of filters at the Westport water treatment station. The water will be dosed with chlorine to kill bacteria, but consumers are being advised to also boil it to kill protozoa unless they have water filters which operate down to one micron.

Several food businesses told The News on Monday they did not know how they would cope. At least one was considering closing temporarily, and some were worried about their coffee machines.

Mrs Sampson said country people put up with untreated water every day.

"It's not filtered, and the businesses in Karamea and further out country deal with it. They've all got coffee machines.

"I get a little bit taken by surprise that the town people have to be wet nursed."

Mayor Pat McManus said people had lost their resourcefulness. "Nobody wants to go back, but pre-1986 that's how it was (Westport had untreated water). We managed..."

"Let's just get on with it. If we procrastinate over this issue we are going to be going around in circles."

Cr Lynley Roberts said there had been many complaints about Westport's water, but people needed to realise council was doing something. "It can't be done any faster than we are. It's just a time thing, and unfortunately people will have to put up with it in the meantime."

Cr Margaret Montgomery welcomed the filter upgrade. But she said it was "only a quick fix" and should have happened much earlier. The water would still taste horrible, and it remained to be seen how discoloured it would be while unfiltered.

At least Karamea had clear water, she said.



Rosalie Sampson

Mrs Sampson: "Come to my place after a flood."

Cr Dave Hawes disputed that the filter upgrade was a "quick fix". He said it was the first stage of upgrading Westport's water.

He welcomed Mr McManus' assurance that council did not want to procrastinate. Past procrastination had left Westport having to replace all its infrastructure at once, he said. "It's ridiculous. It should have been staged."

Council is also looking at long term options for the supply, including the current Sergeant's Hill supply, the Buller River, and groundwater. It has delayed a \$1 million upgrade of Westport's water treatment in the meantime.

Cr Hawes said affordability was increasingly important, because ratepayers were already stretched paying for a new sewage treatment plant and the Solid Energy Centre.

"Water is probably the most major issue we've got to deal with but it has to be affordable. It has to be the best possible affordable fix."

Mr McManus said he did not care if sorting the water took a decade, as long as it produced good results. Council could not get "hung up" on cost. "We have to face the fact that if we want good water, we've got to pay for it."

Cr Jim Halsall noted a water main had been leaking at the intersection of Excelsior and Stephens Roads for over a month, costing ratepayers money.

Operations manager Steve Griffin said he had only just had heard of it, and would tell council's contractor, WestReef Services.

Cr Halsall said someone must have reported it, because a road cone had been placed there.

He believed Westport should continue to source its water from Sergeant's Hill. However, he said the recent water tunnel collapse indicated council should pipe the remaining three tunnels to secure the supply.

Mr McManus said piping might not work. "If the tunnel disappears – and one of them is a greasy back – the pipeline disappears as well."

Mrs Sampson said the reports council had commissioned would give it good information to make decisions and she was certain Westport would end up with good water.



Green Party co-leader Meteria Turei visiting the Mokihinui River. (Photo – supplied)

Greens launch Mokihinui petition

by Amelia Langford

The Green Party has launched a petition in an effort to stop Meridian Energy's Mokihinui hydro scheme going ahead.

Meridian has resource consent for a \$300 million dam and power station, 3km upstream of Seddonville. The dam would create a 14-km long lake and flood the area.

The state-owned enterprise says the scheme will produce between 310 and 360 gigawatt hours per year of renewable energy.

The Green's website now offers a petition and 'eCards' (electronic cards) to send to the Prime Minister asking him to step in and save the Mokihinui, said Green List MP Kevin Hague.

"(It's about) letting ordinary people have their say because of course most people do get shut out of the resource consent process," he said.

Mr Hague also encouraged Meridian customers to write to the company and threaten to withdraw their

account unless Meridian abandoned its plans.

The Mokihinui area was too precious to dam.

"This is one of the last important wild rivers in New Zealand. Its conservation values are extremely high including habitats of at least 16 species that are endangered and it's unnecessary."

Hydro Developments Limited's (HDL) hydro scheme, at Stockton plateau, would generate enough power on its own.

HDL's scheme would have a positive impact on the environment but Meridian's scheme would bring only devastation, said Mr Hague.

The Meridian scheme would create jobs, but it was a small upside.

"There's talks of up to about 300 jobs involved in constructing the dam...they're short-term jobs, that for the most part, would go to people from off the Coast."

Meridian had to jump quite a few hurdles before it could go ahead with the dam, Mr Hague added.

Its consent was under appeal to the Environment

Court. Meridian also needed the Department of Conservation (Doc) to grant it land access.

Earlier this month, the Environment Court refused an application by Meridian and Doc for a hold on appeals. Meridian and Doc had wanted proceedings stalled while they discussed land access and a possible land swap.

The Green Party has urged Conservation Minister Kate Wilkinson to rule out any possible land exchange.

Meridian Energy spokesman Alan Seay told The News he was unsurprised by the petition.

"Opponents do all manner of things to try and reinforce their argument. There's nothing unusual in this..."

"The project is now in the appeals process and Meridian is happy to work through the process as it's laid down under the Resource Management Act."

Go to www.greens.org.nz/mokihinui for more information.

Ratepayer costs spark clash

by Lee Scanlon

Buller ratepayers shouldering interest on loans for new facilities like the Solid Energy Centre (SEC) prompted another clash at yesterday's Buller District Council meeting.

Most sponsorship for the new facilities is drip fed over a decade or more. That means council has to borrow the money in the meantime, and ratepayers have to pay the interest.

Interest payments on the SEC alone are costing ratepayers almost \$1 million a year.

Cr Jim Halsall asked if ratepayers would also have to foot the interest bill for the new Coaltown Museum/iSite in Westport's cultural hub.

Mayor Pat McManus said they might, depending on sponsorship arrangements, but council would budget for it. He said council had gained more non-ratepayer funding than it expected for most Vision 2010 projects, giving ratepayers a "brilliant deal".

Cr Halsall said ratepayers should have to pay only half the interest. The rest should come from sponsors.

Cr David Barnes said former mayor Martin Sawyers had promised ratepayers would fund no more than 50 percent of every Vision 2010 project. But council had had to borrow about 75 percent of the \$16.5 million cost of the SEC, while it waited for drip fed sponsorship money. The sponsors should pay all the interest, he said.

Cr Peter Campbell said council's borrowing spread the burden. "As far as I'm concerned, ratepayers of the future should help to pay for this too."

Westport had not improved its infrastructure for decades, he added.

Deputy Mayor Rosalie Sampson agreed with the mayor. She said most Vision 2010 projects had attracted more than 50 percent non-ratepayer funding and that had helped ease the interest burden on ratepayers, she said. As well, some large grants had

been paid in full immediately.

Council should pursue similar grants for the cultural hub, she said.

Cr Dave Hawes said no one disagreed the SEC was a great asset. "The debate is basically around the economics of where we are putting the ratepayers."

In the last three years, council's indebtedness had climbed by about \$6m to over \$20m, he said.

"That requires debt servicing and anything we do needs to be analysed so we don't inadvertently add excessive debt servicing on the ratepayer."

Mr McManus acknowledged Buller's rates had climbed "astronomically" in the last few years. "But what's driving it? Sewerage and water take up \$1200 of the \$2200 rates in Westport..."

"This council has made some hard decisions, and again, I think we have made the right decisions."

If councillors were re-elected at the October local body elections, they could look at debt reducing projects, he said.

Council's debt level was "very low" compared to other councils. Every council in New Zealand had neglected its infrastructure. "Now we are paying for it."

He confirmed that fixing Westport's water supply came before developing the cultural hub.

He said people kept blaming the SEC for council's indebtedness, forgetting council had also ploughed \$1.2m into Reefton community projects. "Multiply that out by your ratepayer base or population and we've spent probably an equal amount in Reefton."

An angry Cr Hawes, who represents Inangahua, said the funding was for the entire Inangahua ward, not just for Reefton.

"Don't target Reefton and do your maths on the population base in the district. It doesn't add up to anywhere near what you are saying."

Mayors accept miner's invite

by Amelia Langford

Two West Coast mayors have rubbished suggestions that state-owned miner Solid Energy is trying to influence council business.

Solid Energy has invited the mayors of Grey and Buller to watch the All Blacks play the Wallabies in a Bledisloe Cup match on August 7.

Other invitees to the game, at Christchurch's AMI stadium, include senior council staff and the West Coast Regional Council chairman and deputy.

Solid Energy will put the guests up at the Millennium Hotel in Cathedral Square during the weekend.

Buller Mayor Pat McManus said he would be attending the event but would only stay one night in Christchurch.

"There's no ratepayer money involved or anything...I don't get invited to many things like that and I'm really looking forward to it," he said.

He dismissed any suggestion that Solid Energy was trying to influence councils.

"I can't influence the resource consent process or the Environment Court process," he said.

The Buller council met Solid Energy several times a year, as the miner was a major operator in the district.

Greymouth Mayor Tony Kokshoorn has also accepted Solid Energy's invite.

"I'm looking forward to it, I'm certainly taking it up. It's not costing the ratepayers one cent," he said. It was a public-relations exercise.



Pat McManus

"You could say 'yeah Solid (Energy) are trying to curry up to people who can give consents and all that', and there's possibly a little element of that in there, but the point is it's just social intermingling really," he said.

He had no reservations about accepting the invite.

"Put it this way, public companies have been doing this forever and a day and all sorts of outfits have social gatherings and that sort of thing and look after their stakeholders."

He had never watched a match from a corporate box before.

"It's going to be hard yakka sitting up there in the corporate box and if anyone that doesn't like the idea wants to text me, at half-time, I'll tell them the score," he quipped.

Mr Kokshoorn was a big fan of rugby and also rugby league.

"So, if they invite me to something like that, and it's not costing the ratepayers, I'm not turning it down – I'd be a fool. In fact, I can't wait, I couldn't believe my luck when I got the invite..."

"I've looked at those boxes all my life, from the embankment, and thought 'oh I'd like to be in there,'" he said.

Solid Energy spokeswoman Vicki Blyth told the Greymouth Star the company was not trying to curry favour with authorities.

It was quite common to ask key stakeholders to join Solid Energy on social occasions, she said.