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Media Release

Government's National Objectives Framework a significant step

The Government has today released an amended National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management, including a National Objectives Framework, which sets national bottom lines for some freshwater quality parameters.

“The creation of a National Objectives Framework was a key recommendation of the Land and Water Forum. It is significant step forward to have national bottom lines which will guide objective and limit setting around the country,” said EDS Chairman Gary Taylor.

“The content of the National Objectives Framework was always going to be critical. We have some concerns as to whether the detail will in fact lead to the water quality improvements New Zealanders are demanding.

“Submitters said that they wanted to be able to swim in lakes and rivers close to where they live. However the National Policy Statement includes a new objective to ‘safeguard the health of people and communities, at least as affect by secondary contact with fresh water’. This means that there is no national requirement for lakes and rivers to be swimmable because secondary contact is limited to wading.

“This means that communities will need to fight for the right to swim in local lakes and rivers. Instead of giving New Zealanders certainty this means we will have to continue to engage in litigation.

“Safeguarding the life-supporting capacity of freshwater bodies remains a key objective of the National Policy Statement. However, we are concerned that the National Objectives Framework does not provide national bottom lines consistent with this objective.

“The Macroinvertebrate Index (MCI) (a measure of invertebrates living in rivers) is the best way to measure ecosystem health. Despite cross-sector agreement in the Land and Water Forum on the need to include MCI, Ministers appear to have vetoed its inclusion in the National Objectives Framework.

“The National Objectives Framework puts in place a national bottom line for nitrogen toxicity. This is a big problem. The Board of Inquiry which recently heard the Tukituki Catchment Proposal rejected proposed nitrogen toxicity limits, deciding that dissolved inorganic nitrogen limits are required to maintain ecosystem health. This is the case throughout New Zealand.

“The inclusion of a national bottom line for nitrogen toxicity means there is a risk regional councils will view this as an appropriate limit. We are going to have to argue for nitrogen limits that will achieve ecosystem health in each freshwater planning process. Instead of providing certainty this omission means we will have to continue to engage in litigation.

“There are a number of Land and Water Forum recommendations still to be implemented, including a new collaborative freshwater plan making process. Unfortunately, legislation to implement collaborative plan making has been held up due the Government’s fixation on amending Part 2 of the RMA,” Mr Taylor concluded.