

New Zealand: Thousands infected by contaminated water in Havelock North

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Over the past fortnight an estimated 4,500 people in Havelock North have become sick with a gastrointestinal infection linked to campylobacter bacteria in the town's water supply. As of August 21, 10 people remained in hospital, down from 22 a few days earlier. At least one person, 89-year-old Jean Sparksman, died after contracting the disease, which is fatal in rare cases.

Havelock North has 13,000 residents and is located in the Hawke's Bay region, just outside the city of Hastings on the North Island.

Hawke's Bay District Health Board (DHB) chief executive Kevin Snee told TV3 on August 23 there was "a risk" cryptosporidium and giardia were also in the water. Cryptosporidium takes up to 20 days to affect people, meaning there could be "another wave of sickness."

On August 12, the Hastings District Council received test results showing the presence of E. coli bacteria, an indicator for faecal contamination, in one of the bores that feeds Havelock North's water supply. The council was also informed by the DHB of numerous recent cases of vomiting and diarrhoea. A warning was issued to Havelock North residents to boil drinking water while the council began to chlorinate the water. Not all communities in New Zealand have chlorinated water.

This is the worst waterborne disease outbreak in the country's history. With about a third of residents having fallen sick, schools in Havelock North were closed for much of last week and so were many local businesses. A council spokesperson told Radio NZ "the highest percent of sick people were the children."

Local reporter Marty Sharpe, who was sick for three and a half days, wrote in Fairfax Media that many residents "are angry that such a thing could happen in a first-world nation... There is also plenty of anger at the

perceived delay between when Hastings District Council and the [DHB] believed there was a problem, and when they informed the public."

The DHB said the bacteria probably entered the water supply between August 5 and 8, when clusters of people began to report being sick. Mayor Lawrence Yule told TV3's "The Nation" on Saturday that the water supply tested negative for contamination on August 9. A positive indicator for E. coli was discovered in a test on the morning of August 12, but the council only issued a public warning at 6:40 p.m.

Last weekend, National Party MP Craig Foss and the DHB declared that the situation was under control. However, on August 23 a unit of the Mary Doyle Lifecare retirement village, where Jean Sparksman was a resident, was placed in lockdown after a second outbreak of campylobacter illness.

Politicians have scrambled to contain the damage. Prime Minister John Key announced on August 15 that the government and the council would hold inquiries into how the contamination occurred. Yule and council chief executive Ross McLeod issued a public apology, stating: "The council is charged with supplying you safe, reliable water. The council has failed to do this on this occasion."

Tests carried out last week found that two water bores supplying the town had most likely been contaminated with faecal matter from livestock, such as cattle, sheep or deer. The outbreak followed a period of heavy rain, which may have caused runoff into the water supply. What exactly happened has not been confirmed.

On August 15, Yule told TVNZ: "We've never had this happen before, we have some of the most pristine water in the world in our aquifer." However, a third water bore supplying Havelock North was closed last October after E. coli was found. The source of that

contamination was never confirmed, although a nearby mushroom farm was fined for illegal earthworks. The farm uses manure made from chicken faeces.

The opposition Labour Party criticised the National Party government for not declaring “a drinking water emergency” and providing more support for local agencies in response to the crisis. On August 16, Labour MP Stuart Nash told parliament that people should not “go to hospital from drinking water out of our taps... This is a wake-up call that we need to now take the issue of water quality and water security very, very seriously.”

In fact, according to Massey University ecologist Mike Joy’s recently published book, *Polluted Inheritance: New Zealand’s Freshwater Crisis*, New Zealand has “the highest per capita frequency of [waterborne diseases] coliform enteritis, campylobacteriosis, cryptosporidiosis and salmonellosis in the developed world.” There are between 18,000 and 34,000 cases per year. Joy noted that “62 percent of the length of all waterways at some time fail to meet the contact recreation standard” for *E. coli* levels, and “the worst areas for faecal contamination are in intensively farmed and lowland urban areas.”

One indicator of increased pollution was that the number of freshwater fish species threatened with extinction “skyrocketed in the past twenty years from about 20 percent in the early 1990s to a shocking 74 percent now.”

Green Party co-leader Metiria Turei criticised the government for not specifically including land use in the terms of reference for its Havelock North inquiry, “when it is well known that intensive agriculture is linked to declining water quality.”

Notwithstanding the opposition’s criticisms, the unregulated intensification of agriculture took place under both National Party governments and the 1999–2008 Labour government, which was backed by the Greens. Joy wrote: “There has been a four-fold increase in dairy production since 1992, from nearly twice as many cows. This has mostly happened in the absence of regulation or enforcement aimed at containing nutrient losses, so farmers have, in effect, been incentivised to pollute.”

The South Island dairy farming region of Canterbury is particularly prone to outbreaks of waterborne disease.

On March 23, ecologist Alison Dewes told Fairfax Media “economics and dairy intensification are trumping public health and welfare” in the region. Canterbury District Health Board medical officer Alastair Humphreys said bluntly: “We are polluting our water and it will get worse.”

On August 23, ecologist Russell Death told Radio NZ that major rivers in Hawke’s Bay were the most polluted he had seen in the country and another outbreak like the one in Havelock North was “highly likely.”

Dairy products are New Zealand’s main export and the conglomerate Fonterra is one of the world’s largest dairy companies. Whether the industry had any involvement in the Havelock North crisis is not known. What is clear is that in order to maximise profits, successive governments have placed New Zealand’s water supply in peril.



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