

# New Zealand's capital city faces environmental disaster from massive sewage leak

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A catastrophic failure at the Moa Point Wastewater Treatment Plant in the New Zealand capital, Wellington, has sent tens of millions of litres of raw, untreated sewage into the ocean, creating an environmental and public health disaster.

The crisis began during heavy rain on February 4 when a blockage in the plant's 1.8-kilometre outfall pipe caused sewage to back up into the facility, flooding lower floors, destroying vital equipment, and forcing a shutdown. With the plant shut and staff evacuated, about 70 million litres of untreated wastewater per day have been discharged through a short five-metre emergency outfall pipe.

Beaches across Wellington's south coast are closed indefinitely due to bacterial levels far above safe limits. Residents have been warned to avoid the water, not collect shellfish, and keep children and dogs away from the shoreline. Repairs are expected to take months.

On February 7, Radio NZ reported that Wellington Water was racing "against the clock" to remove sewage from the plant before it turned septic and anaerobic, emitted odours and posed health risks to workers.

Wellington Mayor Andrew Little described it as a "catastrophic failure," saying: "This is a sewage plant processing the sewage for a big city, and it has completely failed, it just completely stopped."

Wellington Water chief executive Pat Dougherty admitted that the plant is in "worse shape than feared," with up to 80 percent of equipment damaged. Dougherty was "at a loss" to explain why the outfall pipe failed, saying it "has more capacity than the treatment plant itself, it's designed to be the one thing that works whatever happens."

The disaster, however, was not an unpredictable accident. It is the entirely foreseeable result of decades of

underinvestment in water infrastructure by successive Labour- and National Party-led governments. Serving the interests of big business and the banks, they have prioritised tax cuts, corporate subsidies and military spending over basic infrastructure upon which the working class depends.

The French multinational corporation Veolia was contracted in 2004 to run Moa Point, and then in 2017 all four of the Wellington region's treatment plants: Moa Point, Seaview, Western, and Porirua. The contract is worth \$170 million over 10 years. The company manages 100 water and wastewater facilities across New Zealand, including in the largest city, Auckland.

The company's February 2025 Annual Report boasted that globally 2024 was "an excellent year for Veolia," with record net income of €1,530 million, double what it made five years ago. The Pacific regional operation saw a 4 percent increase in revenue that year. Declaring its balance sheet solid "thanks to strict financial discipline," Veolia increased dividends by 12 percent to €1.40 per share.

Among a litany of complaints about Veolia's operations nationwide, as the disaster at Moa Point was unfolding, a wastewater overflow was reported at the site in Porirua, threatening a nearby state highway. The Seaview plant in Lower Hutt is notorious for odour problems dating back years; last month partially treated sewage was released into the ocean after a mechanical failure.

Victoria University academic Bryce Edwards noted that an independent review of the four Wellington plants in 2021 found Veolia had "failed to carry out basic asset management, including regular maintenance." Equipment was described as "obsolete and outdated and prone to failure." Plants were understaffed, operators were inexperienced, and there was a "lack of executive

oversight.” Wellington Water had issued warnings, infringement notices and abatement notices to Veolia over the preceding 18 months yet the “high costs and risks” of terminating the contract prevented its cancellation.

According to Edwards, Moa Point has been consistently non-compliant over its resource consents, passing compliance checks in only two months since January 2024. A 2020 mayoral taskforce found 30 percent of Wellington’s drinking water assets and 20 percent of its wastewater networks had exceeded their useful life. It concluded that the “current approach is failing” and that decades of neglect had created an escalating crisis.

Moa Point, which processes wastewater for approximately 180,000 people, began operating in 1998. Wellington Water acknowledged in October 2024 that the plant was “aging” and maintenance was “vital” to prevent failures—yet the refurbishment work being carried out at the time of the disaster had actually reduced the plant’s treatment capacity, increasing the risk of exactly the kind of discharge that has now occurred.

In its Long-term Plan for 2024–2034 the Wellington City Council budgeted a record \$4.8 billion to upgrade and maintain water infrastructure, requiring ratepayers to carry a massive cost burden. The council imposed a 16.4 percent rates increase in July 2024, followed by another 12 percent increase in July 2025.

Recently elected Labour Party Mayor Little has promised an “independent” investigation into the Moa Point disaster. But at the same time he absurdly claimed: “There’s been nothing indicated to me in the time I’ve been mayor or even before that that is a plant that’s at risk.”

The comment echoes Little’s statements following the 2010 Pike River mine disaster that killed 29 workers. As the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union leader at the time, Little rushed to defend the company’s safety standards, falsely declaring there had been “nothing unusual” about its operations.

After drinking water in the town of Havelock North was contaminated with campylobacter in 2016—leading to four deaths and 5,500 illnesses—the Labour-led government elected in 2017 promised to fix the country’s rundown wastewater, stormwater and drinking water systems. It developed its Three Waters reforms as a supposed solution. The legislation—which only passed through parliament in August 2023—would have shifted management of water services from 67 local councils into larger regional entities, ostensibly to enable greater investment.

However, Labour refused to allocate the funding required to actually rebuild NZ’s decaying water infrastructure, estimated at \$120 to \$185 billion over three decades. Its policy was designed not to benefit working people but to create corporatised entities oriented towards “cost recovery” and user-pays mechanisms that would burden households with escalating water charges.

Another aspect of Three Waters that generated public opposition was its provision for unelected Māori tribal corporations to have “co-governance” alongside council representatives over water pipes, treatment facilities and other infrastructure.

The National-led coalition government, installed in late 2023, repealed the Three Waters legislation in February 2024. Its replacement policy, cynically branded “Local Water Done Well,” created 42 separate water entities instead of 10, keeping cash-strapped councils responsible for infrastructure, while simultaneously capping rate increases and restricting councils’ ability to borrow.

The result is a vicious circle. Councils cannot raise sufficient revenue to address the infrastructure backlog, the government refuses to fund it, and the working class pays the price—in contaminated water, raw sewage on beaches, and the destruction of the coastal environment.

The catastrophe at Moa Point is not merely a local failure of ageing pipes and neglected machinery. It is a damning indictment of the entire capitalist framework within which essential public services are subordinated to private profit—an international issue, as attested by the experiences with privatised water companies in Britain and elsewhere.

The resources exist to rebuild and modernise New Zealand’s water infrastructure, its crumbling schools, hospitals and housing—but only if the vast wealth hoarded by the corporate and financial oligarchy is expropriated and placed under democratic public ownership and workers’ control. This requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class to fight for this perspective based on a socialist program.



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