

Customers septic over sewerage disposal charges

By **ROBBIE KAY**

WAITOMO district rural ratepayers have every right to be septic over high sewerage disposal charges says the man responsible for cleaning out tanks in the district.

Waitomo Liquid Waste Disposal owner Steve McFall is also concerned the charges will lead to illegal dumping of waste because rural ratepayers with septic tanks will not be able to afford the price hike.

He says Waitomo District Council lifted its discharge fee for accepting waste from \$169 to \$190/1000 litres on July 1, 2012, but as tanks are only cleaned out every four or five years many customers are only just becoming aware of the increase.

Mr McFall, whose company operates 24/7 throughout the Waitomo and Otorohanga districts, says the WDC charge is up to 14 times more than that of neighbouring councils.

"Otorohanga District Council charges \$13/1000 litres, Ruapehu \$36/1000 litres, Waipa between \$13 and \$25 depending on the bacteria in the waste (that's tested) and New Plymouth charges \$65," he says.

"The worrying thing is, Waitomo council's website states that fees and charges are reviewed annually to reflect the true cost of providing services, so who knows where it will end up?"

"My question is how can Otorohanga council charge \$13, while Waitomo council reckons \$190 for the same thing is justified?"

CUSTOMERS NOT HAPPY

Mr McFall passes council's discharge fee directly to his customers on

top of the usual service fee he charges for emptying a septic tank.

And, he says his customers are not happy.

"My phone rings constantly with people complaining about their bill, but there's nothing I can do.

"I just pass on council's fee and I don't add a cent.

"The horrific thing is the council's discharge fee is often more than my fee for emptying the septic tank.

"When they get their account customers get pretty upset, which is understandable but there's nothing I can do about it.

"It's got nothing to do with the quality of the professional service I provide and I'm not happy."

BUSINESS COST

Waitomo Liquid Waste Disposal is the only disposal company licensed to operate in the district and discharge to the sewerage ponds.

Mr McFall says the council's charges will cost him business in outlying rural areas.

"A Taumarunui operator can sneak into Aria, and even Piopio if they want to, pick up that tank and take it back to Taumarunui for discharge into the ponds there for \$35 per 1000 litres.

"And a New Plymouth operator could sneak over the boundary into Mokau for \$65. But I have to charge \$190 for the same service.

"Some of my bigger regular customers who have six tanks to be emptied every two years are going to go elsewhere. Otherwise they're looking at having to pay something like \$1140 per empty - why would they?"



COSTLY WASTE: Waitomo Liquid Waste Disposal owner Steve McFall says the sewerage disposal charges paid by Waitomo district ratepayers with septic tanks are up to 14 times higher than those charged by some neighbouring councils. But the council says the charges are based on 'user pays' and fair to ratepayers overall.

TO P4

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FROM P1

He believes the high charges could lead to illegal dumping of human waste.

And he's concerned "waste disposal cowboys" may come into the area, clean out tanks, then dump the effluent somewhere in the bush to avoid council fees.

"The problem is customers are legally responsible for the discharge of waste, so people with septic tanks need to be sure of where their waste is being dumped," says Mr McFall.

He is also concerned the high fee will lead to customers having their tanks cleaned less frequently with dire consequences.

"Someone having his tank cleaned regularly every four years may look at taking that out to every eight years, or wait until the effluent actually blows out the top.

"That causes more problems down the track with solids blocking up the soak line and preventing bacteria in the tank working properly."

USER PAYS

Technically he could take liquid waste from septic tanks in the Waitomo district to Otorohanga's sewerage ponds for disposal, however, he says that practice is frowned on.

And he is wary of doing something that could

lead to an increase in Otorohanga's discharge fees. That very practice – disposing waste collected in one district in the sewerage system of another – is part of the reason why Waitomo district prices increased.

Waitomo District Council chief executive Chris Ryan says in 2007, the council's charge was so low a lot of the waste discharged into the Te Kuiti ponds for disposal was actually coming from another district which wasn't fair.

"On analysis, it was also costing Te Kuiti ratepayers a great deal of money to maintain and improve the facility, so council wanted to be sure the charges were more fairly allocated," says Mr Ryan.

"A clear policy decision was made to establish a greater fairness between what ratepayers in Te Kuiti are charged and what other people who don't contribute to the sewerage scheme have to pay."

Mr Ryan says the logic behind that policy is the effluent ponds and treatment equipment near the aerodrome are paid for by a small group of Te Kuiti ratepayers while the owner of say, a holiday home at Kiritehere, had been able to dispose of their septic tank waste for a very low charge.

"In other words, the pricing is driven by council's wish to be fair to Te Kuiti ratepayers by making people who use the sewerage treatment facility occasionally pay what the service is worth."

Drop in numbers at annual Junats camp

THE number of junior naturalists attending an annual winter camp at Te Kauri Lodge near Oparau is dramatically down and organisers are baffled as to why.

The camp, which caters for budding David Attenboroughs and David Bellamys interested in New Zealand's natural history and conservation, is run by the Hamilton Junior Naturalist Club founded in 1961.

It began on Monday with just nine participants aged 12-17 years.

President Mike Safey says this is the Junats smallest camp ever and he doesn't know for certain why so few young people are interested, although several members are away on holiday.

"We've got an action-packed programme designed to appeal to these young people and Te Kauri Lodge itself is a stunning facility set in more than 16 hectares of native bush and sleeps up to 100," he says.

On Monday the group set up trail cameras and rat monitoring lines and went on a night walk through the bush.

On Tuesday they carried out bird counts, collected rat lines, planted trees, laid a weta trail and went weta and possum hunt tonight.

Yesterday was spent visiting historic spots near Te Kauri and Awaroa, and walking along the coastal sand dunes.

Today they plan to download information from the trail cameras, go tramping and locate and map rata and kamahi indicator trees.

Mr Safey says over the years Junats members have made some stunning discoveries including the first kokako sighted in Te Kauri Park for 50 years and the recording of four 'new' land snails species.

Junats also uncovered the 35 million-year-old fossilised bones of a 1.5m penguin at Te Waitere, fossilised whale bones and an ancient Maori stone



GREEN FINGERS: Last year Junats got advice from Charlie Smart (front) at Smart Plants Oparure nursery when selecting young native specimens for their annual winter camp tree planting programme at Te Kauri Lodge. FILE PIC

sculpture identified as a lost toanga (treasure) of Tainui, along with important botanical finds.

"We can only speculate on the reason for the drop in camp participants this winter," says Mr Safey.

"They are normally very popular. Young people love getting out in the bush checking out the bugs and critters.

"We're also doing some important conservation work, monitoring bird and predator numbers."