

Ngapaeruru

Opinion from Ken Sims
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It's a small, sparkly little river. The Mangatoro stream rises in the Waewaepa Range, flows through fractured limestone hill country and down fertile valleys, gathering the Mangatakoto, Mangamaire and Pukokomuka streams into itself to earn river status, before joining the Manawatu river. And it has history. Back in the late 1800's George Douglas (Captain) Hamilton operated what was probably the North Islands first trout hatchery beside it, liberating brown trout in many of the southern North Islands rivers and streams. Just downstream from this site, the river flows through a small bush reserve off Ngapaeruru Road.



In 2012, Canadian Tag Oil came to Ngapaeruru Road with a licence to drill an exploratory well for oil or gas. It came as a surprise to many, as the District Council had decided not to notify the consents. They operated with the same tactics that have been reported overseas; unpublicised agreements with local authorities, buying drilling rights from farmers with secrecy clauses that stopped neighbours talking to neighbours, tightly controlling access to anywhere near the drilling site, and photographing anyone coming down the road. Under a shroud of uncertainty, secrecy

and suspicion they put a well down to 1417 metres, finding “encouraging and exciting” wet gas and oil evidence in the naturally fractured Waipawa and Whangai formation source rocks. These are similar to the North American Bakken rock source, which is heavily hydraulically fractured for gas extraction. Having found what they were looking for, the Canadians capped the well and moved on to the next site, leaving many unanswered questions.

Whether they will be back probably isn't one of them. It is almost a certainty. But there is a lot that's less certain. According to the Manawatu Standard of July 8th, after granting consents to drill, the Regional Council claimed to be ‘keeping an eye on the site to ensure that Tag was adhering to its consent conditions’. What consent conditions? We aren't told. We are told that testing includes sampling groundwater, surface water, monitoring stormwater, erosion, and sediment levels. Who does these, and what were the results? We don't know. Do they include the presence of aromatic hydrocarbons? We don't know. What we are told is that the baseline sampling of ground and surface water was done by – you guessed it – Tag Oil. Oh really? But they were signed off by an independent lab. Who was that? We don't know. What were the results? We don't know. What we can be sure of is that unless they sampled, analysed, reported and financed them independently, such assurances are pretty meaningless.

We are also told that the Regional Council will be “visiting the site monthly for the next three months to check all is going well”. This is two months after Tag had finished and moved on, and the site was cleared. Perhaps they were waiting for any sediment and contaminants to wash away before they arrived? And if and when they do check, will those results be publically available?

This brings us back to the Mangatoro River, a historic fishery and an important spawning water of the Manawatu River. Why has neither the Regional Council nor the Tararua District Council even notified Fish & Game, much less discussed the operation with them? It all seems a bit ‘wishy-washy’ and ‘airy-fairy’ to us. We believe that if this Government is determined to encourage overseas companies to extract and export our natural assets, the very least they can do is assure the New Zealand public that our interests in and dependency on our freshwater are protected, in an open and transparent way. This seems an excellent example of how not to do that. It leaves the distinct impression of a smugly smiling fox, saying “Move along folks, nothing to see in this henhouse”.

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