

Report 07.381
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Committee Rural Services and Wairarapa
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Didymo Long Term Management Programme

1. Purpose

To seek the Council's approval for additional expenditure, commencing in the 2007/08 year, for Greater Wellington's contribution to the long term management of the aquatic pest Didymo in the Wellington region.

2. Significance of the decision

The matters for decision in this report do not trigger the significance policy of the Council or otherwise trigger section 76(3)(b) of the Local Government Act 2002.

3. Background

Report 07.271 was presented to the Rural Services Committee at the 10 May 2007 meeting. That report gave a summary of the current status of Didymo in the South Island and of the intention of Biosecurity New Zealand (BNZ) to enter into partnerships with regional stakeholders for long term management programmes should it appear in the North Island.

The development of partnerships is essentially a prerequisite before Cabinet will consider allocating any additional Crown funds for future management. Whilst there will be some additional Crown funds available in the short term (i.e. summer social marketing programmes), the long term scenario is that regional councils will need to allocate additional funding in their LTCCPs in order to be effective lead partners.

Report 07.271 outlined the five key roles for regional councils involved in long term management –

- Assist in the development of a lower North Island Incursion Response Plan (note that BNZ will still be the lead agency should Didymo arrive in the North Island);

- Continue with the social marketing campaign, focusing on the “Clean, check, dry” slogan;
- Undertake surveillance and monitoring as part of existing water quality programmes (where possible), and in high value ecosystems;
- Participate in specific research to improve management decisions;
- Co-ordinate and review regional initiatives.

Two Greater Wellington Divisions will be involved in the long term management of Didymo. The Divisions include Catchment Management and Environment. The Water Supply, Parks & Forests Division are also likely to become involved if Didymo is located in water supply catchments and affects water supply intakes and or treatment processes.

4. Future Costs

Environment Division

Actions that will become the responsibility of the Environmental Monitoring and Investigations Department under the partnership arrangement include surveillance surveys and the provision of river information, including flow rates and water quality data.

BNZ’s assumption is that surveillance and monitoring will be undertaken as part of existing water quality monitoring programmes. In practical terms this is not realistic in the short term as this work is contracted out and would require a significant change to the terms of the contract. This means that to fulfil our partnership responsibility we would need to initiate a separate Didymo programme.

A Didymo programme, based on surveillance only would cost in the order of \$7,000 per year with samples collected in house and identification done by a contract laboratory. If Didymo was found in the North Island, the surveillance programme would need to be expanded – a doubling of the number of sites sampled would cost approximately \$10,000 per year. Any further increase in the number of samples collected would require external resources to be contracted or additional staff to be employed. It is unclear at this stage whether this would be required as the focus of the monitoring programme may have to change.

BNZ’s response to an incursion in this region will require GW’s involvement at a number of levels. There is an expectation from BNZ that GW is able to provide specific information about the river concerned. The key data requirements include flow data, chemical composition, and substrate composition. This information would be used to assess the viability of a river as a Didymo habitat and whether control measures would succeed.

Some of this information is currently available, but we are lacking some key components of chemical composition. To get this basic understanding would cost an additional \$10,000.

Apart from these direct costs, there are additional costs associated with the potential or actual presence of Didymo, costs which must be borne regardless of the partnership arrangement. These relate to the extra time and expense in “checking, cleaning and drying” gear as our routine work requires the transfer of equipment, vehicles, sampling gear, etc between catchments. Whilst this is standard good practice to avoid the transfer of any species from one aquatic environment to another, the much greater adverse effects that Didymo would have on our waterways makes the need for this more imperative.

It is estimated that the additional time taken would add 15% to the cost of water quality sampling or around \$20,000 per year. The alternative would be to have separate equipment for each catchment monitored but this is considered to be neither practical nor cost effective.

Catchment Management Division

Additional costs incurred in this Division would be mainly staff time, transport, advertising and some materials.

Biosecurity staff would be involved in the following activities:

- developing the Lower North Island Response Plan (one off cost);
- convening Steering Group meetings;
- organising and managing preparedness exercises;
- placing of signs at strategic positions;
- communicating with water users;
- advertising campaigns;
- working with BNZ on control programmes;
- managing public inquiries

Costs associated with these activities have been calculated at slightly over \$20,000. An allowance has been made for some of these activities to be funded out of existing budgets i.e. managing public enquiries.

Total Combined Costs

Environment Division – \$20,000 direct costs plus a further \$20,000 for additional time spent in ensuring monitoring equipment is adequately decontaminated between catchments.

Catchment Division - \$20,000

5. Potential Impacts

The arrival of Didymo in the rivers of the Wellington region will have a dramatic impact on the future use of our waterways for recreation. Containing the contamination to specific catchments will require the use of legal powers under the Biosecurity Act. River users will be forced to change the way they currently recreate. Catchments may have restricted access. Recreational equipment must be decontaminated regularly.

The most significant impact, however, will be on the in-stream values. Environmental changes, based on the South Island experience, will be catastrophic. Didymo will become the dominant in-stream feature, causing a decline in fish, invertebrates and flora.

Research on a control tool continues. However results to date suggest the current tool – chelated copper – may only be effective in short reaches and for restricted times. Research continues regarding the impact of repeated dosing.

The environmental damage caused by Didymo in North Island conditions may be less than that experienced in the south. However, there is no certainty that this will occur. It is important, therefore, that additional funding is made available to ensure GW is in the best possible position to assist in the management of Didymo should it arrive in this region.

6. Communication

GW staff will continue to work with BNZ on the development and distribution of Didymo information materials. GW will participate in the 2007/08 summer social marketing campaign with funding assistance provided by BNZ.

7. Recommendations

That the Committee recommends to Council that it:

- 1. Notes that there is currently no funding provision in the LTCCP for the management of the aquatic pest Didymo in the Wellington region;*
- 2. Agrees to provide new funding of \$60,000 per annum, from 2007/08, for the long term management of Didymo.*

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