

# Perfect storm: water supply tightens as island dries up

A warm, dry start to summer has already stretched the island's water supply - and forecasters believe the conditions will continue with far-reaching consequences across the island.

October and November saw unusually low rainfall on Waiheke and both Wai Water and Island Water - citing 'unprecedented demand' - are fully booked until mid-to-late January.

With another water supply firm Waiheke Aquifers still out of action after it was gutted in March's floods, many residents are on the brink of running dry.

"I see this as being potentially a major disaster over the next two weeks," says Jesse Ball, Waiheke Aquifers' owner. "We are battling with our insurance for a resolution ... I estimate we'll be back running in probably eight weeks, the end of January or early February, that is providing everything goes to plan."

“The route cause of the problem hasn't been solved - the council is still arguing about how to solve it.”  
- Jesse Ball of Waiheke Aquifers

"As early as July I called a crisis meeting with our insurers to explain that we were fighting delays. I've been arguing about this for months."

"When all the companies are running [the supply] is almost enough without



Photo Richard Jones

The early arrival of summer is bringing more visitors and soaring demand for water.

the tourists; but what's happening is that every year more tourists are coming across and people are staying longer."

His initial research has suggested that, with his company out of the equation, the island's peak water supply could be as little as 25 percent of what's needed to match the more than two million litres per day required.

A rain gauge at Pie Melon Bay Farm

detected just 39mm of rainfall during November, compared to a 102-year average of 74mm. Of that, 21mm fell on just two days on 18-19 November. In the last 11 days of the month, the station recorded only 1mm of rain.

A MetService station in Oneroa recorded even lower figures - an unseasonable 19.5mm in October, 37mm in November, and just 0.5mm for the first

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week of December.

The National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) also confirms the warm water temperatures Waihekeans have noticed. Sea surface temperatures are significantly warmer than usual; a one or two degree upwards swing around the upper North Island and a remarkable four, five or six degrees above average around the South Island.

"All the way in to Waiheke Island I'd estimate that general sea surface temperatures are at 19 or 20 degrees, but there may be some shallow bays that are up to 21 degrees," NIWA Meteorologist Ben Noll says.

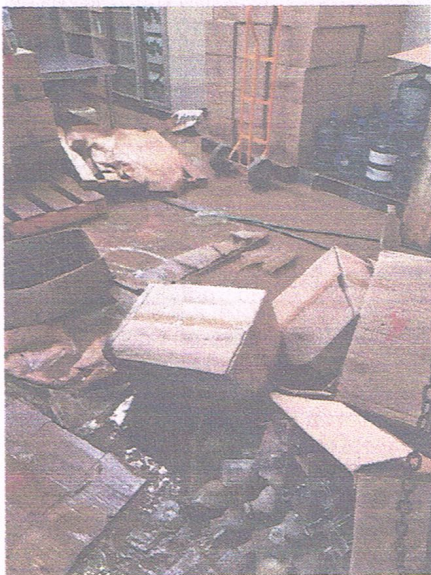
"In Auckland, there are some shallow bays approaching 23 degrees, so it's very impressive in general and a lot warmer than this time last year."

In fact, this "marine heatwave" around



Photos Richard Jones

Jesse Ball, whose water production premises (left) were wrecked in the March floods, says island suppliers cannot meet demand.



New Zealand and Australia represents the largest ocean temperature swing in the world. It's been driven by a La Niña climate pattern, which originates in the equatorial Pacific and has marked effects on global ocean temperatures. In combination with a large ridge of high pressure over the Tasman Sea for the past three weeks it has ensured calm, tranquil conditions allowing the sun to warm coastal waters.

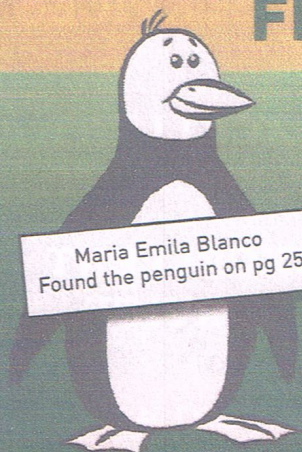
"As an island nation, as the seas go, we go. If we have warmer than average seas you have higher confidence, if not high confidence, for warmer than average air

temperatures," Mr Noll says.

Climate change also forms a backdrop to these short-term phenomena. A new NIWA report to Auckland Council predicts global emission rises may lead to a serious 3.75C temperature increase over the next century in New Zealand, and concurrent acidification of coastal waters.

"Climate change is a long game. We're warmer now than we were 10 or 20 years ago. It's kind of like an accelerator and you're putting more and more pressure on it with each passing year and temperatures increase a little."

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While short term water-supply challenges on the island reign for now, NIWA experts still forecast a larger than average rainfall for the summer period, meaning there may be a double-edged sword effect.

"It could be a tale of two seasons in the North Island. In these La Nina years, sometimes the second half of the season can bring with it the risk of ex-tropical cyclones, storms that track from the subtropics to the north and bring with it a lot of moisture to the upper North Island - so at some point during the season an invisible switch might be flipped and we'll get into a rainier pattern," Mr Noll says.

While any February and March rains will refill residents' tanks, heavy downpours in late summer could cause havoc for the island's wineries and flood-prone homes and businesses.

Mudbrick head winegrower Patrick Newton says late summer downpours followed by muggy spells and high temperatures can bring explosions of rot.

"We do worry about it when the grapes are ripening at the end of the season and we get heavy downpours."

Elsewhere, residents groups are concerned. Late last month, 25 Onetangi property owners voiced frustration over years of council inaction over flooding and poor drainage maintenance. Holiday



Only 39mm was recorded by Pie Melon Bay's rain gauge in November.

home owner Andrew Hirst had endured three floods in five years. He said at the

time: "I went to the meeting today expecting them to say 'this is what we are going to do' - but that's not going to happen to June. Let's hope it doesn't flood again before then."

It could be a tail of two seasons in the North Island... at some point during the season an invisible switch might be flipped and we'll get into a rainier pattern.

- NIWA Meteorologist Ben Noll

Onetangi Residents' Association chairman David Baigent agrees. "Any large amounts of rain from now on are going to be a concern for us."

Auckland Council had said it would be at least June before remedial works could begin, which was the middle of the rainy season. "I would urge Auckland Transport to start thinking preventatively," Mr Baigent says. "This flooding issue, unless it's properly addressed, is just going to happen again."

There may also be ramifications for Mr Ball's company. "If we've rebuilt the factory and it happens again, I'm not sure where we would go from there - probably

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back to the start and do it again. Of course it concerns me. The route cause of the problem hasn't been solved - the council

is still arguing about how to solve it."

"I've got massive concerns, but at the end of the day we've got to do what we've

got to do and start building this business back to the point that it starts sustaining Waiheke again." • *Richard Jones*

## Community must step up, chairman says

There are fears that private water supply firms will be unable to meet demand as tourists flock to the island and climate conditions increase pressure on natural resources.

"Every day we go without rainfall, the waiting list for water will just get longer and longer," says local board chairman Paul Walden. "The industry needs to be aware that if they're not going to step up and adequately cater for the growth and demand then they can expect other operators to enter the market."

This summer's water shortage is unlikely to surprise many Waiheke residents, who will remember a similar crisis in early 2013 when dry conditions led to queues for public showers. Then, concerns were raised for families thought to be living below the United Nations minimum standard for water.

"Scientists have been warning us for a number of years now that our weather patterns are likely to change and that we're likely to find that, on an annual basis, we will have significant heavy rain and also periods of significant drought," Mr Walden says.

"There is a long-term message here that people need to be increasing their volume of water storage at home."

While local suppliers are straining to fill the surge in demand, there is little chance of council intervention.

"There's no mechanism whereby Auckland Council will be stepping in and providing - at short notice - some sort of reticulated supply solution. I've explored this at great length and the only legislative responsibility that I can find reference to is the Ministry of Health. It's definitely not a council responsibility to intervene."

Any council intervention would likely

be expensive, he adds. Though the council may look to increase commercial capacity for the island's bores, there would have to be a matching increase in the companies' delivery capabilities. These issues, inexorably tied to the private system in place on the island, are unlikely to abate in the future.

As a result, Mr Walden says it is ultimately up to the community to resolve its water problem.

"There's a whole range of things that really need to be sharpened up, but people need to get real - they are on a private supply on an island, and there's no easy solution. Having hour-long showers in the middle of summer just isn't a possibility."

Mr Walden also urges people to use public facilities and water fountains and share private water bores wherever possible. • *Richard Jones*

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