

Council to seek court orders to force non-complying farmers to improve effluent storage

Gerald Piddock 16:06, Dec 14 2018



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This small sump of less than 2000 litres was servicing a herd of over 300 cows and was discovered on a Waikato dairy farm during its effluent monitoring inspections in 2018.

The Waikato Regional Council will now be seeking court orders to force dairy farmers to get the right infrastructure in place if found to be repeatedly non-compliant in managing their effluent.

The move is part of the council's new strategy to lift compliance rates after new figures show that 31 per cent (74) of the 239 high risk farms inspected by the council since July were significantly

non-compliant.

So far this year, the council has started nine prosecutions and are formally investigating a further 16, investigations manager Patrick Lynch said.



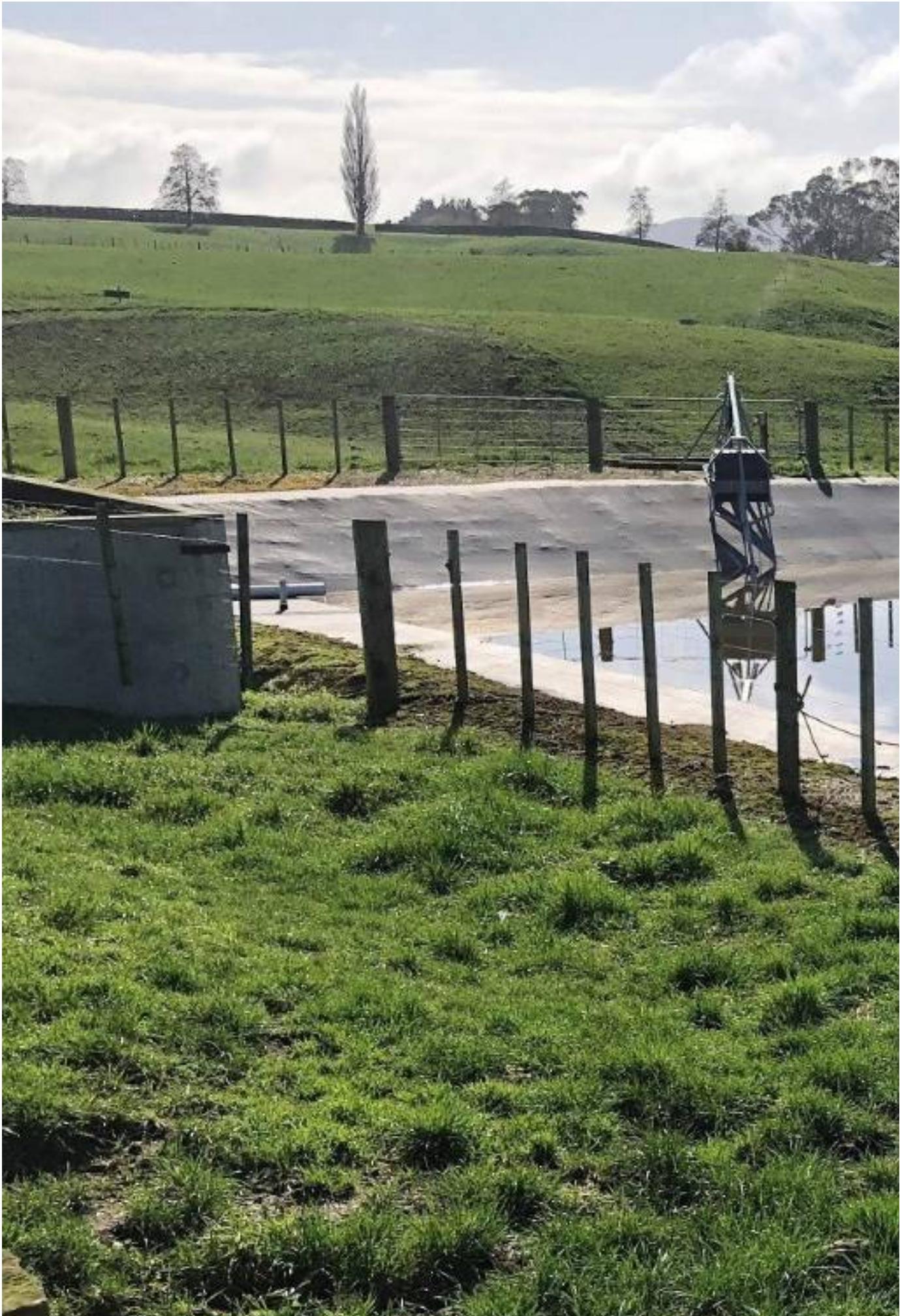
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The Waikato Regional Council found this poor example of effluent storage on a farm in its inspections this year. It consists of a very small sump of less than 1000 litres servicing a herd of just under 200 cows.

Those prosecutions will include the council seeking court orders from the judge that will force the farm owner to seek an accredited effluent storage designer to design an effluent storage plan that suited the farm, and get it installed.

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"We don't want to leave our involvement with the farm until we know they are in a good place," he said.



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This Waikato farm has a good example of what effluent storage should look like: A lined storage pond, 1 million litres servicing a herd of 176 cows.

Over the last five years, the council took about four or five prosecutions relating to dairy effluent each year.

The remaining 165 farms inspected were still categorised as high risk farms and the council will keep revisiting those farms.

The new monitoring figures show how dire the state of infrastructure is on some of the region's dairy farms.

The council's farming services team leader Stuart Stone said the scale of the offending was much greater than what they anticipated.

"The deficiencies that we are finding are pretty significant. We are seeing systems that might not necessarily be a bathtub, but are a square or a rectangle."

Many of these farms used small sumps to store their effluent. This meant the farmer either had to continuously irrigate their effluent out regardless of the weather or risk the sump overflowing.

As soon as the farmer irrigated in wet weather, that effluent risked flowing off paddocks and into waterways. This is why farmers were required to have storage capacity to account for those wet periods.

Lynch said some of these systems could barely hold 1000 litres. Council staff had repeatedly met and interacted with these high risk farmers to see when they would improve their infrastructure.

"Those conversations have literally gone on for years and that's our concern, that the really poor performers just aren't changing and seems like the council has been left to make them change.

"In my mind it's not acceptable. It's not the council's responsibility, this is the industry's responsibility and all of those individual farmers and they need to change their behaviour."

Lynch believed there were some dairy industry players who mistakenly believed that effluent management was in a good space and had moved on, but the latest figures showed this was clearly not the case.

"This is graphically demonstrating that we really have got a long way to go."

All of the Waikato's farmers know about the region's water quality issues. But for whatever reason, there is still a significant proportion of farmers who think the rules do not apply to them, Lynch said. "This is not about dairy farming. This is about the poor performers. We have to recognise those at the positive end of the spectrum but we all need to work together to deal with the poor end of the spectrum."

Waikato Federated Farmers president Andrew McGiven said while installing a new effluent system was expensive, dairy cannot afford further self inflicted images which gave the perception that the industry had no regard for the environment.

"So my hope is that WRC can continue to work proactively and pragmatically with farmers then hopefully we can all achieve a win-win for the farmers and the industry as a whole."

DairyNZ environment and catchment manager Aslan Wright-Stow said these farmers were letting the industry down and backed the council's approach.

"These farmers are bringing down the good work of the approximately 3600 other Waikato dairy farmers who are doing their bit to look after waterways, manage effluent well and are investing in the latest technologies.

"Each farm has the potential to have an impact – we want all our dairy farms doing their part to manage effluent well and look after the environment."

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