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FINAL Version

Cook Islands Sanitation Policy

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Contact Person: Tekao Herrmann	Approved By: Mac Mokoroa – Acting Secretary of Infrastructure and Planning	File Number:
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Background

Protection of the environment and public health are key priority areas for the Government of the Cook Islands, as mandated in “The Cook Islands – Te Kaveinga Nui” National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP) 2011-2015.

Recent reviews have clearly identified issues with and risks to public health and receiving environments as a result of sub-optimal sanitation. For example, the lack of proper management and disposal of wastewater is evident in the quality of water in some of the streams and lagoon areas on Rarotonga, where significant concentrations of nutrients and pathogens have been found from time to time. These findings highlight the urgent need for Government to drive the implementation of viable and sustainable sanitation solutions that meet immediate and future health and environmental needs and are in synergy with aspirations for the economic growth, social development, and overall wellbeing of the country and its people.

In order to achieve outcomes that support and contribute to the continued growth of the Cook Islands and meet the goals of sustainable development, strategic planning of sustainable sanitation infrastructure and practices is vital.

As quoted in the NSDP “A sustainable future for our nation requires us to effectively integrate economic, social and environmental issues in order to make the wisest use of our capital stocks to meet the needs of current and future generations. We recognise that economic, social and environmental problems and solutions are inter-connected and that an integrated approach to address these issues, underpinned by good governance and fundamental cultural values to address these issues will ensure that our development is sustainable”.

It is, therefore, desirable that a national sanitation policy is developed, to establish principles and objectives that will form the framework for future sanitation strategies, plans and solutions that will address the sanitation needs of each of the Cook Islands.

Introduction

The consumption of water and the generation of human wastes are such commonplace aspects of human life that planning for the appropriate provision of related systems, services and solutions is often overlooked. The evidence is abundant that failure to ensure an adequate supply of safe water or to arrange for appropriate disposal of wastewater is a major contributing factor to disease transmission, ill health and detriment to the environment.

Tourism in the Cook Islands accounts for 68% of the country's GDP. The ever-increasing growth in tourism has contributed towards continued development in the Cook Islands, which has put pressure on existing water and sanitation infrastructure and services. This pressure leads to increased threats to and detrimental effects on receiving streams, groundwater and lagoons, which in turn in lead to greater risks to public health and ecology and ultimately could threaten the economic growth and prosperity of the country. Appropriate management and disposal of wastewater is therefore essential to the Cook Islands economy, health of our people and visitors and the environment.

The primary focus of this policy is on the safe disposal of wastewater from dwelling units and work places with a view to protecting, restoring and improving the state of the lagoons around our islands. This process will be aided by the use of appropriate treatment systems and disposal methods as required under the Public Health (Sewage) Regulations 2008. In addition, consideration of best animal farming practices is critical to the implementation of this policy, in light of their potential impact on water quality.

The provision of sustainable sanitation infrastructure is integral to improving and maintaining a good quality water environment. The interaction of land use planning processes is a key tool to ensuring strategic sanitation issues readdressed. The process of planning for and delivering sustainable development is based on the integration of environmental, social and economic factors.

Scope

The scope of this policy is primarily related to:

- Safe disposal of sewage and other wastewater; and
- The promotion of health and hygiene practices in the Cook Islands

The term 'sanitation', however, extends to cover cleanliness, hygiene, proper collection of liquid and solid wastes and their environmentally sound disposal.

This policy will affect all sectors of the community in the Cook Islands with particular recognition of.

- The need to ensure that domestic wastewater is treated safely, effectively and in a sustainable manner
- The need for commercial and residential properties that provide tourist accommodation to use 'best practice' for wastewater and sanitation management

- The need for commercial and residential animal farmers, particularly piggeries, to manage their animals in ways that minimise potential impacts on the environment

Purpose

The purpose of the Sanitation Policy is to provide a high-level framework and a set of guiding principles for the sanitation sector in the Cook Islands. The Sanitation Policy is one of a suite of documents, including a Sanitation Strategy, which will drive and enable development of the sector in such a way that it will contribute to the sustainable development of the Cook Islands.

The remainder of this Policy sets out the key Policy Statements and Policy Principles that contribute to achieving this aim.

Policy Statements

The following policy statements are the central, driving elements of this Cook Islands Sanitation Policy

Policy Statement 1

Wastewater treatment and disposal systems shall comply with global standards that are sustainable and economically viable, and safeguard the environment and the health of communities in the Cook Islands.

Policy Statement 2

Government shall work in an integrated manner across all relevant Ministries and Agencies, and with communities, businesses and other stakeholders, to achieve the aims and implement the principles of this Sanitation Policy.

Policy Statement 3

Communities and individuals will be encouraged and, where necessary, required to participate in ongoing improvements and maintenance of water and sanitation systems through implementation of best practices and compliance with relevant and appropriate standards with a view to protecting and improving public health and water quality.

Policy Principles

The overall aims of this Sanitation Policy, expressed in the Policy Statements set out above, will be achieved through adherence to the following policy principles, and implementation of strategies, plans, programmes and projects based on these principles.

Overarching National Policy Principles

Policy Principle 1

The Cook Islands will comply with all conventions or treaties related to sanitation that it has signed and committed to.

Policy Principle 2

Sanitation practices in the Cook Islands shall comply with all applicable Cook Islands law.

Specific Legislative and Regulatory Policy Principles

Policy Principle 3

All on-site wastewater *treatment* systems shall comply with the Public Health (Sewage) Regulations 2008 and the Public Health Sewage (Code) Regulations 2008 and any relevant succeeding legislation.

Policy Principle 4

All on-site wastewater *disposal* methods shall comply with the Public Health (Sewage) Regulations 2008 and the Public Health Sewage (Code) Regulations 2008 and any relevant succeeding legislation.

Policy Principle 5

Where septic tanks are determined to be an acceptable on-site sanitation solution:

1. Septic tanks for new housing developments shall comply with AS/NZS 1546:1:2008* and AS/NZS 1547:2012*¹.
2. Existing septic tanks that do not comply will require upgrading and replacing to the appropriate standard.
3. Septic tanks shall be desludged in accordance with the Public Health Sewage (Code) Regulations 2008.

*Australian/New Zealand Standard – On-site Domestic Wastewater Treatment Units

¹ Australian/New Zealand Standard – On-site Domestic Wastewater Management

Policy Principle 6

The responsibility for maintenance and upgrade of all on-site treatment and disposal treatment systems lies with the user (householder / family land holders / Hotels / Commercial enterprise etc).

At the discretion of Government, an exception may be made in circumstances where there is actual or potential harm of the environment arising from existing on-site treatment and disposal systems. In such circumstances, Government may choose to replace or upgrade the systems (on-site treatment and disposal systems) and bear some or all of the associated costs.

Policy Principle 7

For public sewerage and/or wastewater treatment systems Government in the first instance will bear the costs for installation and/or upgrade to the main system.

All private connections to the public sewerage system shall be installed and maintained at the cost of the user. (Householder / family landholders / Hotels / Commercial enterprise etc).

Policy Principle 8

Where an area is served by a public sewerage system, any new development should connect to the public sewerage system. Government will therefore promote connection and appropriate upgrade to the public sewerage system.

Policy Principle 9

The design and construction of sanitation systems will recognise local conditions and operational capability, and local capacity will be built as part of each project to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Management Policy Principles

Policy Principle 10

Government will promote and encourage the use of toxic-free washing and cleaning chemicals that will not kill micro flora in septic tanks.

Policy Principle 11

Government shall consider the deposition of levies or taxes on germicides (such as strong detergents, disinfectants, toilet cleaners and bleaches) as they kill the micro flora that makes the septic system work.

Policy Principle 12

Waste from domestic and commercial animal farming shall comply with all relevant policies, legislation and regulations in the Cook Islands.

Policy Principle 13

Public awareness programmes will encourage and support the development and implementation of sanitation best practice programmes that provide learning opportunities to the wider community.

Policy Principle 14

Operational management and maintenance of public sanitation infrastructure shall be undertaken in consultation with affected parties, landowners and communities and traditional values shall be recognised and respected.

Water Quality Monitoring Policy Principle

Policy Principle 15

Water quality monitoring of the streams, groundwater and lagoon shall be conducted regularly by a number of Government Agencies and organisations. All monitoring will contribute to achievement of relevant policies including the principles in this policy.

Guiding Principles

The implementation of this policy must:

- Respond to community needs
- Take into account the local socio-economic context
- Consider national and local government policies, priorities and stakeholder's views

Strategic Considerations

The implementation of this policy will be in alignment with:

- The Cook Islands – Te Kaveinga Nui 2011-2015 National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDP)
- Infrastructure Master Plan (IMP)
- Cook Islands Party Manifesto
- Public Health Act 2004
- Environment Act 2003

Roles & Responsibilities

Agency	Roles and responsibilities
Ministry of Infrastructure and Planning - Water, Waste & Sanitation Unit (WATSAN)	Implementation Monitoring and evaluation Review every two years
Ministry of Health – Public Health	Enforcement and regulation Monitoring and evaluation Review every two years

This policy will be lead by the WATSAN unit of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Planning.

The development of operational guidelines for and implementation of this policy will lie within the work plans of the WATSAN unit, in collaboration with Ministry of Health - Public Health division.

The Ministry of Health is responsible for enforcing and regulating the legislative aspects of the fundamental principles of this policy.

Performance Targets, Monitoring Indicators, Evaluation and Review

The monitoring and evaluation framework that supports the NSDP and IMP includes relevant indicators to measure the implementation of this policy.

The activities associated with this policy will be monitored through

- Divisional Quarterly reports
- Statistical and Annual reports

The outcomes of this policy will be evaluated 12 months after the date for implementation and thereafter after every 36 months. This policy may be reviewed as part of any evaluation process or else every 24 months.

Key Targets & Indicators

- Upgrade 80% of all onsite wastewater treatment and disposal systems to comply with AS/NZS 1546:1:2008 and AS/NZS 1547:2012 or relevant global standards by 2020.
- Restoration of lagoon water quality to achieve all relevant water quality criteria consistently, by 2020.
- For Rarotonga and Aitutaki, design and implementation of an optimized island wide wastewater treatment and disposal approach, which is in line with best practices and provides the best overall solution for the islands by 2020.

- By 2020 all tourist accommodation (3 units/bedrooms and above) will meet at least the basic standard set in a relevant set of criteria set by WATSAN (Warrant of Fitness).
- All public wastewater infrastructure will be designed and constructed in a way that minimises the effects on the environment and takes into account the risk associated with climate change.
- Government ministries and agencies will work together to ensure that development across the Cook Islands is consistent with this policy and ensures adequate protection of receiving environments.

Glossary

Sanitation	Sanitation generally refers to the provision of facilities and services for the safe disposal of human urine and faeces (World Health Organisation), for the purposes of protecting human health and the environment
Septage	The waste content found in a septic tank.
Sewage	Wastewater from domestic or industrial establishments that is carried out in sewers or drains for treatment and disposal or conversion into a form that is non-toxic.
Sewerage	A system of sewers.
Sewers	An artificial, usually underground conduit for carrying off sewage or rainwater.
