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## Water quality at the heart of healthy communities

The quality of New Zealand's waterways and drinking water cannot be compromised and the health and wellbeing of people in rural communities must not be put at risk, even in the short term, says New Zealand Rural General Practice Network chairperson Sharon Hansen.

Ms Hansen was commenting following the recent (February 23) freshwater announcement by Environment Minister Nick Smith, which set a target of 90 per cent of New Zealand's lakes and rivers meeting swimmable water quality standards by 2040, alongside releasing new policy, regulations, information maps and funding to help achieve the new goal.

"There is a clear and urgent need to have confidence in the safety of our fresh water systems, be they for drinking or bathing, from a public health perspective, sooner than 2040. 23 years is simply too great a timeframe to get the water quality up to a safe acceptable standard," says Ms Hansen.

"We also understand that under revised standards in the Government's Clean Water document, water that New Zealanders will swim in will be riskier in terms of exposure to E. coli.

"Our communities insist their children are able to swim in a local water hole without fear of becoming ill and to know they can turn on the tap and drink water without fear of becoming ill because the water source is contaminated."

Fresh in people's minds is the gastroenteritis outbreak in Havelock North (August 2016), which resulted in more than 5000 people falling ill, through the presence of E. coli in the water supply, says Ms Hansen.

"Whether it's bathing, fishing or drinking, the quality of our rural waterways and water supplies cannot be compromised by either bad practice, insufficient monitoring or standards of monitoring, or delayed action.

"This government's water policy has been compromised by desire for economic growth rather than the long-term view on environmental sustainability. With increasing evidence of climate change already heading out of control, New Zealand should be leading the way in changing systems for everyone's future. Accepting second rate water quality standards merely continues the behaviour of short term gains at the expense of our children's futures and New Zealand's sustainability."

For comment contact NZRGPN Chairperson Sharon Hansen on 021 189 4391.