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Safety risks at two South Wairarapa campgrounds

Te Awaiti is a public coastal reserve and a popular spot for freedom camping at Oterei River, on the South Wairarapa's coast.

The South Wairarapa District Council has recently flagged its intention to ban overnight camping at Te Awaiti and potentially another low-lying camping ground nearby, North Tora, due to concerns about flash flooding.

A third camping ground in the area, South Tora, is safe for camping.

A petition has been started on Change.org calling for the camping ground ban at Te Awaiti to be suspended while more research and consultation is done.

Petitioners are concerned about a lack of notification or consultation regarding the campsite's public safety. Some campers say they have never seen a flash flood.

But experts at the Council and at Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) say the danger to public safety has not been exaggerated, especially as the summer approaches. Here is why.

Why is the overnight camping closure necessary?

GWRC has recommended that overnight camping should not continue on the lower portion of the Te Awaiti campground (see images attached) and a more appropriate camp site be found.

The combination of a rain-swollen river and high seas means that in an adverse flooding event, the river could rise by 1.5 to 2 metres with similar sea swells.

There is no warning system so if a flood occurred at night, there would be no way for campers to know until their campsites were swamped.

A similar situation exists at the campsite at North Tora, south of Te Awaiti on the Awhea river. There, the river could rise by up to 2m (see image).

Both campgrounds have a 1 per cent AEP (annual exceedance probability) flood event, meaning that there is a one-in-100-year chance of a dangerous flooding event. Or put another way, a 1 per cent chance in any given year.

"Due to the coastal flooding hazard, the river flooding hazard and the tsunami risk for this site, we recommend caution be used," GWRC advises.

What has Greater Wellington Regional Council recommended?

GWRC suggests that a more appropriate campsite be found at Te Awaiti that would still be close to the beach to allow for ready access for campers. This is in progress.

According to its engineers, the sea and mouth conditions at Te Awaiti are unpredictable and complicated by a sandbar.

When the river mouth closes at the sand bar, the depth and speed of flooding in the adjacent reserve increases. The mouth closes frequently, meaning that the risk of flooding is present almost permanently.

The size of the catchment and short response time are also factors. It is estimated that at Te Awaiti, it would take approximately three hours for flood waters to reach the mouth of the river from its head.

The flood waters would take approximately four hours to reach North Tora. There, the beach is less susceptible to being swamped by waves except from the biggest storms. However, flooding from the river can be complicated by a storm surge impeding drainage at the mouth, especially if it is closed by its sand bar.

A 1 per cent AEP is a far higher risk than the risk of a large earthquake of the type that buildings are designed for, so GRWC advises that people sleep in areas outside the hazard area.

Other regional councils use up to a 0.005 per cent AEP flood event, or a 1-in-200-year flooding event, as their threshold.

What about emergency services?

Both sites are very remote. While there is easy access to high ground if something happened and there was adequate warning, in bad weather there would be a reduced chance of helicopter evacuation.

The current vehicle access is long and winding, meaning a drive of several hours from emergency facilities. In a flooding event, parts of the access roads are likely to also flood, blocking vehicle access. The probability of river and coastal flooding occurring, coupled with the consequences of not having easy access to emergency services, raises the risk significantly.

Why can't we put in an alarm?

It would be very difficult and expensive to provide a warning system. The Te Awaiti river is over 20km in length and the catchment is about 65 square kilometres in size.

Putting in a reliable warning system could cost up to \$50,000. A rain gauge located at the top of the river's catchment could cost about \$10,000 to install, plus maintenance costs. It would need to be monitored periodically to replenish the gauge's power supply. Similarly, a warning system could cost up to \$30,000 at North Tora.

Why hasn't this been a problem for campers before?

Anecdotally there have been reports of problems before. Locals have reported overnight tourists getting caught in flash floods and having to be helped by locals on several occasions.

Climate change is likely to make this flooding risk worse. The frequency of storms, and river and coastal flooding will increase throughout the century. Heavier downpours are also expected, also believed to be due to climate change. The lower portion of the Te Awaiti Reserve will be under water

when sea levels eventually rise. Simply put, there will be more flooding from the river and sea than there has been historically.

Why was there no consultation?

In cases where there is a danger to public safety, the Council's chief executive has authority to act immediately. The chief executive has obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, and this situation is one which has been assessed as requiring appropriate action.

Council chief executive officer Harry Wilson says the old "camp at your own risk" approach is no longer appropriate in the modern health and safety environment, and the situation is more urgent with summer and Labour Weekend approaching.

Mr Wilson says he will explore all possible avenues to mitigate the risks. But public safety is the most important factor.

"It is my responsibility as CEO to make these calls if there is a safety risk that cannot be mitigated."