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Nonsensical approach to quarrying hits rock bottom

The outdated view of local authorities is proving costly, writes Richard Michael

AUCKLAND is gearing up for a large amount of essential infrastructure development over the next decade — including several roads of national significance. Our civil construction industry has the skills and capacity. But will it be able to source the aggregates it needs to build them?

New Zealand's civil construction sector is one of the most aggregate (crushed stone or gravel) hungry in the world. Current consumption is estimated at 50 million tonnes a year with about 75 per cent of that being for local authority work.

Without aggregates, construction simply could not go ahead — roads, schools, homes, hospitals, railway, cycletracks, drainage and broadband projects wouldn't happen. It is the bedrock of modern society.

Yet as demand from councils grows, authorities' own planners are increasingly closing off access to local quarrying resources, often unwilling to renew existing quarry permits, let alone grant new ones.

Industry experts warn that the gap between future demand for aggregate and consented reserves is widening. Auckland only has between eight and 12 years of consented resources remaining.

The attitude of Auckland's local authorities — and many other local urban bodies — appears to be based on an entrenched, outdated view of quarries as noisy, dirty and environmentally undesirable neighbours.

As chief executive of Straterra, the industry group representing New Zealand's natural resources industries,



ECO AWARE: Winstone Aggregates was the first company of its kind in New Zealand to have a Biodiversity Action Plan.

PICTURE / NORTHERN ADVOCATE

I aim to raise awareness of misconceptions surrounding quarrying and other extraction industries.

Local authorities want large amounts of aggregates — but not produced on their patch. About 25 per cent of aggregates required for Auckland's road are already sourced over 100km

away in the Waikato or Northland.

Clearly any extraction process has an environmental cost but, as James Boyce, president of the Aggregate and Quarry Association of New Zealand, has pointed out, quarrying faces some of the most stringent environmental control regimes of any industry.

The association, which represents 85 per cent of companies involved in quarrying, has been driving home messages about sustainability since the 1970s.

The industry takes its environmental responsibilities very seriously — Winstone Aggregates in Auckland was the first company of its kind in New Zealand to have a Biodiversity Action Plan.

Today new quarries are established in ways ensuring they are as unobtrusive as possible, with visual impact minimised through extensive landscaping, screen planting and raised earth banks.

Technological developments have been significant. Machinery now has noise mufflers and there are excellent measures to address issues of noise, dust and water quality — so that air and water quality at quarries can sometimes be better than on neighbouring properties.

Site rehabilitation strategies include replanting native bush, reshaping land or backfilling to create ponds and pasture.

Former quarry sites are increasingly being put to community use. Auckland's Mt Smart Stadium is on a former quarry site and a \$28 million marine education centre is proposed for a

former quarry at Wellington's Lyall Bay.

Any environmental impact needs to be set against the carbon footprint of transporting aggregates long distance — and the increased traffic flow bringing added wear and tear of heavy trucks on roads.

The National Freight Demands Study found that over 40 million tonnes of aggregate was moved around New Zealand last year, the largest amount of material moved in the country — and 99 per cent of it was transported by road.

There is also a heavy economic toll. The price of a truckload of gravel can double for every 30km it has to travel — a cost picked up by ratepayers and taxpayers.

Very good sources of aggregate are available close to Auckland and the way forward is to allow realistic access to those.

We will be pressing for a national policy statement outlining long-term goals for the sector and a whole of government response to issues related to the natural resources industry.

Richard Michael is chief executive of Straterra, a newly formed group representing the natural resources industries.