

New standards test Council's in-house laboratory

10 April 2019 - ADC - New

standards for testing New Zealand's drinking water had the potential to increase costs for ratepayers in Mid-Canterbury, but a group of hardworking staff at the Ashburton District Council made it their mission to upgrade their facilities and keep those costs down.

New

standards from the Ministry of Health (MOH) in the final weeks of 2018 required that all suppliers use an 'enumerated' water testing method, one that the Council's MOH-recognised in-house laboratory was not able to conduct.

The change, part

of a review of the Drinking Water Standards after the Havelock North incident in 2016, would have forced the Council to deliver daily water samples to a laboratory outside of the district, at an additional cost to Council.

"Previously, the Council's laboratory

met the standards by conducting what is referred to as a 'Present/Absent' test, which detects whether coliforms and E.coli are in drinking water samples or not.

The new standard required 'enumerated' tests, a method that provides an indication of how much contamination may be present in the water," Council's Service Delivery Group Manager, Neil McCann said.

In

layman's terms, a Present/Absent test method would be similar to a teacher giving a pass or fail mark, while an enumerated test would see them provide a score of how many questions were answered correctly.

"Although

the quality of the district's drinking water hasn't changed since the events in Havelock North, the way councils around the country make sure their water is safe has been tightened up to ensure a similar incident doesn't happen again."

"The change in testing methods is one of the ways that MOH is making that happen," Mr McCann explained.

For

the Council, the prospect of its laboratory no longer meeting the new standards was considered to be too unrealistic for officers to manage and far too much of a cost burden for ratepayers: Staff would not only be collecting daily water samples (as they currently do), but would also need to drive an extra two or more hours to take the samples to an out-of-district laboratory.

A decision was made to invest in additional equipment at the Council's lab and transition to an enumerated test method. Although a delicate and detailed process on its own, there was also a looming deadline that the Council would have to meet.

From the time that the Council learnt that it could lose its laboratory recognition, to when the new testing method would be required by 1 March 2019, staff in the Council's Assets team had just two months to research, source equipment, set up a new documentation process and implement the new method.

"The team were driven to see the new system working by the deadline, and a lot of extra hours were put in. They really went above and beyond," Mr McCann added.

Their efforts paid off, and the new system was operational by 1 March, saving the district from having to use an alternate laboratory in other parts of the region.