



Flood Risk in Motueka Catchment workshop: Meeting Synthesis, Key Messages, and Next Steps

28 May 2026, Shedwood Hall, Tapawera

This document has been produced by MCC volunteers using the Ai system Claude to draw out key themes and findings. It has been carefully reviewed and edited by MCC staff to ensure accuracy of the synthesis. It draws on the more detailed workshop notes available on the MCC website.

Summary

On 28 May 2026, more than 120 residents, growers, farmers, professionals, scientists and agency staff gathered in Tapawera to discuss flood risk and impacts in the Motueka catchment and how the community and councils can respond together. The day was opened by Neil Deans (Ngāti Koata) with a karakia and facilitated by Heather Collins, with presentations from Dr Emily Lane (NIWA / Earth Sciences Principal Scientist), Dean Palmer (Manager, Hinetai Hops), and Mirka Parker and Alastair Clements (Acting Group Manager: Environmental Services, and Team Leader Natural Hazards and Geomorphology, Tasman District Council), with questions and facilitated commentary from participants, and an afternoon of table-based workshop discussion on a number of key questions, followed by closing reflections and karakia.

The framing question for the day was whether Motueka River catchment faces the *same* flood problem it always has, or a changing one — and if it is changing, how the community should respond and how limited resources should be targeted. The June 2025 flood event is now the largest flood on record. The science presented was clear that, while the number of floods may not rise, climate change is increasing rainfall intensity and the energy available to cyclones, making larger events more likely. Set against this, the community repeatedly stressed the value of long-term local knowledge, working together, and acting proactively before the next event rather than only after it.

The mood was constructive but impatient. There was strong, visible support (roughly a third of the room or more) for the view that current river-management rules need to change, and recurring frustration that gravel extraction and landowner actions are constrained. Equally strong were themes of social connectedness, trauma and the human cost of flooding, and a

desire for more gatherings of this kind. The clearest risk participants named themselves was “collective amnesia” — that momentum and memory fade between floods.

Key Messages from the Day *(synthesized from speaker key points and participant responses)*

The hazard is changing, not just recurring

- **Record-breaking events.** Motueka’s recorded flood history runs from 1887; the June 2025 flood is now the largest on record, and historic newspaper accounts (e.g. 1929) show floods clustering in close succession. Flood impacts and levels are however experienced differently in different parts of the catchment depending on rainfall location, intensity and duration.
- **Increasing rainfall intensity:** A warmer atmosphere holds more moisture, increasing short-duration, localised rainfall intensity. Warmer seas and marine heatwaves raise both the likelihood and intensity of cyclones reaching New Zealand; one modelled Cyclone Gabrielle track ran directly into Tasman.
- **There are compounding factors.** Saturated ground, wind, drought-to-flood swings and tidal influence increasingly need to be modelled together rather than separately.

The Motueka River system is complex and interconnected

- The Motueka River functions as an interconnected system, with each reach responding differently to floods and sediment movement. Actions taken in one part of the river can amplify effects downstream, so management needs to be locally tailored while still aligned with whole-catchment thinking.
- Land uses, landowners, and communities across the whole catchment all influence how a flood behaves and what impacts it has — from forestry and farming, to people living alongside rivers, to Council’s river works.

The human and relational dimension is central

- **Community trauma is real and ongoing.** Participants described PTSD-like responses to rain. The science referenced (Dr Holly Thorpe’s Cyclone Gabrielle work on health and wellbeing impacts and Wairewa case studies) points to hidden costs — health, insurance, lost accommodation, hard personal decisions.
- **Trust and “spirals.”** Community–council relationships were described as either downward spirals (low trust, less achieved) or upward ones (trust, momentum). Several speakers see the relationship as strained, especially since the old catchment-board era ended.
- **Social connectedness builds resilience.** Communities that know each other recover better; simple local connection was seen as protective.

There is a strong appetite for action — and friction over the tools

- *Gravel management is a contested topic.* Many see gravel extraction as the most cost-effective tool and were frustrated it was reportedly dismissed as a “myth” and left out of forward plans; Council’s position, and that of some other workshop participants, is that gravel removal helps at the right time and place but is one tool among many.
- *Works on private property is helpful but is constrained.* Dean Palmer’s farm used angled tree planting and vegetated stopbanks that held debris out during 30 hours of inundation with no losses; participants want more freedom (and advice) to protect their own land.
- *Rivers cannot be engineered to never flood.* There was generally consensus that very large floods will spread into the floodplain including to overtop some stopbanks; the question is how we give the river room to move and choose where failure is most acceptable.
- *Council’s face real constraints over protection.* A ~24,000-ratepayer base carrying both district and regional responsibilities means trade-offs are unavoidable; Council’s role is not to remove risk from every property, and the catchment cannot be engineered out of the problem.

Information and coordination gaps were named repeatedly

- Demand for accessible flood maps, river/rainfall data, river management levels in different parts of the catchment, an early-warning system people can register for, and clear guidance on what landowners can do without consent.
- Concern about forestry slash, wind-thrown pine, and species choice (e.g. radiata on Separation Point granite).
- Repeated calls to capture and retain local and elder knowledge, and to improve catchment-wide communication resilient to power and cell outages.

Suggested Next Steps

Drawn from the workshop discussions, table notes and closing reflections.

Short term (within 12 months)

- Set up and test the registerable flood-alert system and publish how to sign up; improve catchment-wide communications (incl. options resilient to power/cell outages).
- Provide information and guidance on what works landowners can do to mitigate flood risk without consent.
- Increase community input to, and information about, gravel management, including providing a simple explanation of gravel-extraction policy, limits and decision criteria.
- Gather and organise local knowledge, science, and mapping information into accessible information for the community on flood hazards.

- Hold field days and practical demonstrations to increase knowledge sharing, including one at Dean Palmer’s property on riparian planting. Other topics could include fencing, bank protection, willow/species management, Civil Defence roles.
- Begin riparian planting on priority reaches bringing in “right tree, right place” thinking.
- Connect neighbouring landowners (telephone trees, shared equipment, “survival pacts”).

Medium term (2–5 years)

- Develop a community-involved, catchment-scale gravel management plan with agreed criteria (science + local expertise + TDC) and share the evidence base for gravel decisions.
- Encourage and support sub-catchment community gatherings to address flood risks at a local community level.
- Expand riparian buffers and nature-based measures (wetlands, secondary flow paths/swales, room for the river); explore funding via carbon and biodiversity credits, rates rebates and philanthropy.
- Use flood-zone information to guide where to build, and review building methods/foundations and development on flood-prone land.

Long term (5+ years)

- Establish a strong, community-led, catchment-scale coordination framework that includes iwi/mana whenua, farmers, businesses and residents, with central-government engagement on guidance and funding.
- Engage forestry on best practice and slash management, and explore transitioning from pine on vulnerable geology.
- Seek acceptance and funding for adaptation options including managed retreat / buy-back where appropriate, and pursue review of the TDC global rivers consent and river-management framework.

Across all timeframes, participants emphasised the importance of clear communication, shared understanding, and community involvement in shaping decisions.

Participants bottom line: the day will only benefit the community if it leads to action, funding and a genuine shift toward being proactive rather than reactive.