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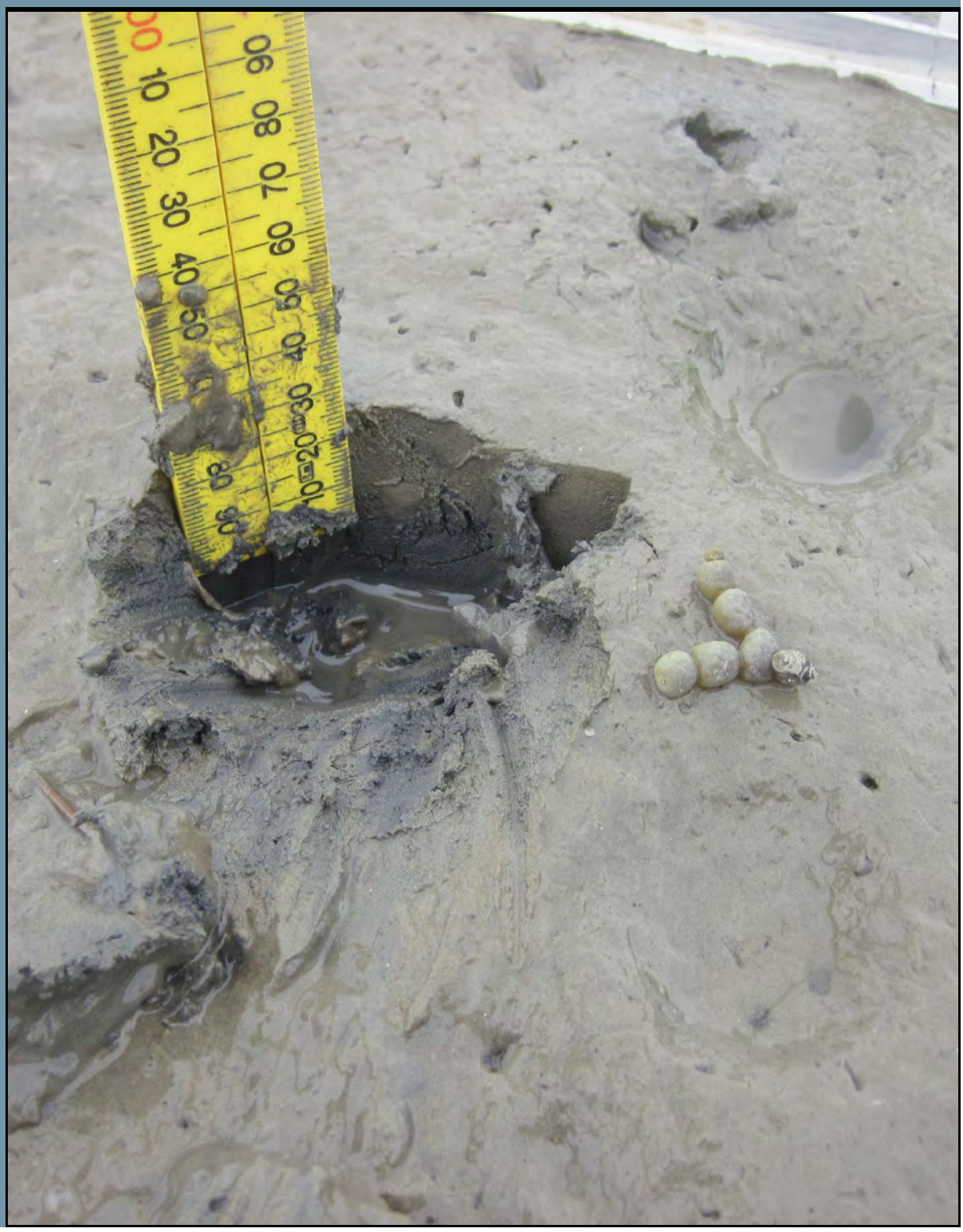
Whareama Estuary

Intertidal Sediment Monitoring 2011/12



Prepared for Greater Wellington Regional Council April 2012

Cover Photo: Whareama Estuary - Site WhaB - soft muds and shallow RPD, 22 February 2012.

Upstream fine scale and sediment plate site, WhaB.

Whareama Estuary

Intertidal Sediment Monitoring 2011/12

Prepared for
Greater Wellington Regional Council

By

Leigh Stevens and Barry Robertson

Wriggle Limited, PO Box 1622, Nelson 7040, NZ. Ph 03 545 6315, 021 417 936; 0275 417 935, www.wriggle.co.nz

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1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

Whareama Estuary

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Vulnerability Assessment
Identifies issues and recommends monitoring and management. Completed in 2007 (Robertson and Stevens 2007)

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Whareama Estuary Issues
Moderate eutrophication
Excessive sedimentation
Habitat Loss (terrestrial margin)

↓

Monitoring

Broad Scale Mapping
Sediment type
Saltmarsh
Seagrass
Macroalgae
Land margin

5 -10 yearly
First undertaken in 2007. Next due 2017. Macroalgae not yet undertaken.

Fine Scale Monitoring
Grain size, RPD, Organic Content
Nutrients, Metals, Invertebrates, Macroalgae

3yr Baseline then 5 yearly
Baseline complete. Next survey 2015.

Sedimentation
Annually

↓

Condition Ratings
Area soft mud, Area saltmarsh, Area seagrass, Area terrestrial margin, RPD depth, Benthic Community, Organic content, N and P, Toxicity, Sedimentation rate.

Other Information
Previous reports, Observations, Expert opinion

↓

ESTUARY CONDITION
Moderate Eutrophication
Excessive Sedimentation
Low Toxicity
Habitat Degraded (terrestrial margin)

↓

Recommended Management

- Manage sediment and nutrient inputs.
- Set nutrient, sediment guidelines.
- Margin vegetation enhancement.
- Manage weeds and pests.

Soil erosion is a major issue in New Zealand and the resulting suspended sediment impacts are of particular concern in estuaries because they act as a sink for fine sediments or muds. As a consequence of a catchment dominated by steep hills, combined with a soft rock type and a primary landuse of pastoral grazing, Whareama Estuary receives elevated inputs of fine sediments, has turbid waters, and a muddy bed.

Recent monitoring (Robertson and Stevens 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) has shown the estuary has high sedimentation rates, poorly oxygenated sediments with a high mud content, and a benthic invertebrate community dominated by high numbers of a few mud and organic enrichment tolerant species. These findings indicate the estuary is experiencing problems related to excessive muddiness and poor sediment oxygenation. This triggers annual monitoring of sedimentation rates, grain size, and RPD depth.

The current report summarises the intertidal sediment monitoring results for these indicators in Whareama Estuary, one of the key estuaries in the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) coastal monitoring programme. The report presents the results from sampling on 22 February 2012, and uses condition ratings developed for Wellington's estuaries to rate the condition of the estuary, and recommend monitoring and management actions.

Detailed descriptions of sampling sites and methods are provided in (Robertson and Stevens 2008, 2009, 2010), and are briefly summarised below.

Sedimentation Rate

To measure the sedimentation rate from now and into the future, a set of 4 concrete plates were buried in the estuary in 2008. Each plate, marked by wooden pegs and GPS referenced, was located and the depth of sediment over the plate measured by pushing a probe into the sediment until it hit the plate. A number of measurements on each plate were averaged to account for irregular sediment surfaces.

Grain Size

To monitor changes in the mud content of sediments, a single composite sample of the top 20mm of sediment was collected from 10 plots at each fine scale site (WhaA and WhaB) and analysed by Hill Laboratories for grain size (% mud, sand, gravel).

Redox Potential Discontinuity (RPD) depth

To assess sediment oxygenation, the depth to the RPD was measured at 10 plots at each fine scale site by digging down from the surface with a hand trowel until the RPD transition was located.

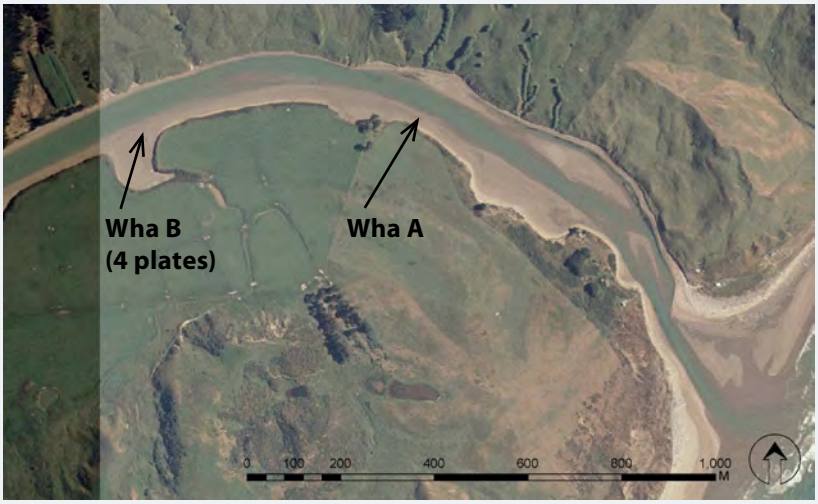

Figure 1. Location of fine scale sites and buried sediment plates in Whareama Estuary.

1. Introduction and Methods (Continued)

WELLINGTON ESTUARIES: CONDITION RATINGS

A series of interim fine scale estuary "condition ratings" (presented below) have been proposed for Whareama Estuary (based on the ratings developed for Southland's estuaries - e.g. Robertson & Stevens 2006). The ratings are based on a review of estuary monitoring data, guideline criteria, and expert opinion. They are designed to be used in combination with each other, and with other fine and broad scale indicators (usually involving expert input) when evaluating overall estuary condition and deciding on appropriate management. The condition ratings include an "early warning trigger" to highlight rapid or unexpected change, and each rating has a recommended monitoring and management response. In most cases initial management is to further assess an issue and consider what response actions may be appropriate (e.g. develop an Evaluation and Response Plan - ERP).

Sedimentation Rate

Elevated sedimentation rates are likely to lead to major and detrimental ecological changes within estuary areas that could be very difficult to reverse, and indicate where changes in land use management may be needed.

SEDIMENTATION RATE CONDITION RATING		
RATING	DEFINITION	RECOMMENDED RESPONSE
Very Low	0-1mm/yr (typical pre-European rate)	Monitor at 5 year intervals after baseline established
Low	1-2mm/yr	Monitor at 5 year intervals after baseline established
Moderate	2-5mm/yr	Monitor at 5 year intervals after baseline established
High	5-10mm/yr	Monitor yearly. Initiate ERP
Very High	>10mm/yr	Monitor yearly. Manage source
Early Warning Trigger	Rate increasing	Initiate Evaluation and Response Plan

Redox Potential Discontinuity

The RPD is the grey layer between the oxygenated yellow-brown sediments near the surface and the deeper anoxic black sediments. It is an effective ecological barrier for most but not all sediment-dwelling species. A rising RPD will force most macrofauna towards the sediment surface to where oxygen is available. The depth of the RPD layer is a critical estuary condition indicator in that it provides a measure of whether nutrient enrichment in the estuary exceeds levels causing nuisance anoxic conditions in the surface sediments. The majority of the other indicators (e.g. macroalgal blooms, soft muds, sediment organic carbon, TP, and TN) are less critical, in that they can be elevated, but not necessarily causing sediment anoxia and adverse impacts on aquatic life. Knowing if the surface sediments are moving towards anoxia (i.e. RPD close to the surface) is important for two main reasons:

1. As the RPD layer gets close to the surface, a "tipping point" is reached where the pool of sediment nutrients (which can be large), suddenly becomes available to fuel algal blooms and to worsen sediment conditions.
2. Anoxic sediments contain toxic sulphides and very little aquatic life.

The tendency for sediments to become anoxic is much greater if the sediments are muddy. In sandy porous sediments, the RPD layer is usually relatively deep (>3cm) and is maintained primarily by current or wave action that pumps oxygenated water into the sediments. In finer silt/clay sediments, physical diffusion limits oxygen penetration to <1cm (Jørgensen and Revsbech 1985) unless bioturbation by infauna oxygenates the sediments.

RPD CONDITION RATING		
RATING	DEFINITION	RECOMMENDED RESPONSE
Very Good	>10cm depth below surface	Monitor at 5 year intervals after baseline established
Good	3-10cm depth below sediment surface	Monitor at 5 year intervals after baseline established
Fair	1-3cm depth below sediment surface	Monitor at 5 year intervals. Initiate ERP
Poor	<1cm depth below sediment surface	Monitor at 2 year intervals. Initiate ERP
Early Warning Trigger	>1.3 x Mean of highest baseline year	Initiate Evaluation and Response Plan

2. RESULTS, RATING AND MANAGEMENT

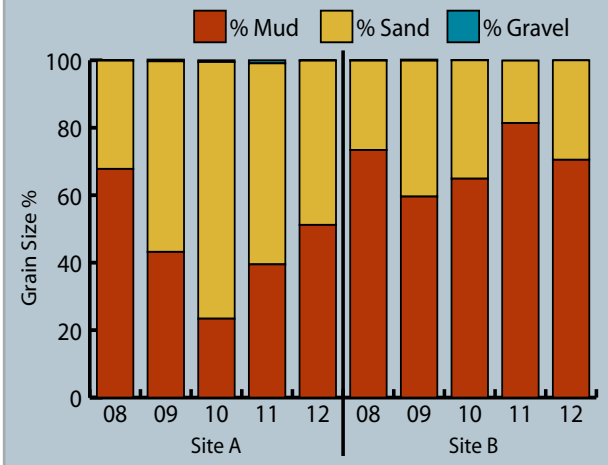

Figure 2. Grain size, Whareama Estuary (2008-2012).

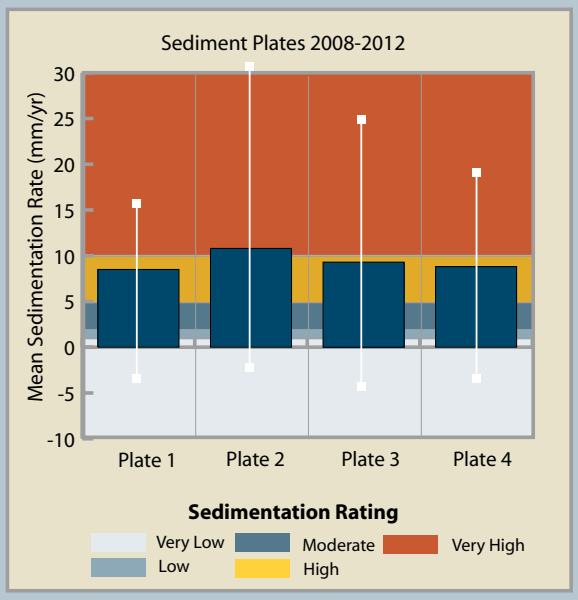

Figure 3. Sedimentation rate from plate data (mean and range), Whareama Estuary (2008-2012).

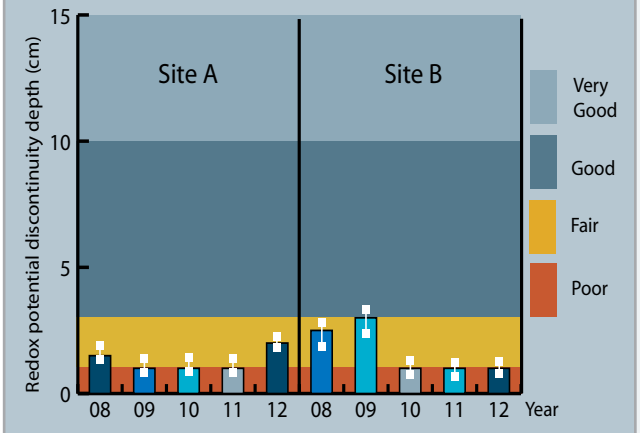

Figure 4. RPD depth (mean and range), Whareama Estuary fine scale sites, (2008-2012).

The three indicators used to assess sedimentation in 2012 were grain size, sedimentation rate, and RPD depth.

Grain Size

Grain size (% mud, sand, gravel) is a key indicator of both eutrophication and sediment changes. In tidal river estuaries that lack large intertidal flats, like Whareama, elevated levels of mud are often present along the narrow channel banks in the lower estuary. A high or increasing mud content signals a deterioration in estuary condition.

Both Whareama fine scale sites are excessively muddy and show no signs of obvious improvement since monitoing started in 2008 (Table 1, Figure 2). Site A exhibits greater variability between years, and has a higher sand content, because of its location at the dynamic boundary between muddy terrestrial sediments and sandy marine sediments. Both sites are subjected to flood erosion and deposition. Field observations, and anecdotal reports from locals, highlight rain and flood events can quickly deposit large volumes of mud in the lower estuary, followed by more gradual erosion. Such pulsed inputs are usually highly detrimental to the animals living on and in the sediments.

Rate of Sedimentation

The depths to four plates buried in Whareama Estuary (see Robertson and Stevens 2008) were measured in February 2012 as part of annual long term sedimentation rate monitoring in the estuary (Figures 3 and 6, Table 2).

Mean annual sedimentation rates for the site since 2008 range from -2 to +21.8mm/yr. The variance between years is almost certainly due to river related deposition and erosion of sediment. The highest rate of sedimentation was recorded in 2011 (21.8mm/yr - Figure 6). In 2012 deposition increased an additonal 3mm giving an overall site mean of 9.3mm/yr, and a total increase of 39mm since 2008. This is within the "high" category and indicates that the intertidal flats in the mid Whareama Estuary are currently infilling at a high rate.

Redox Potential Discontinuity (RPD)

The depth to the RPD boundary is a critical estuary condition indicator in that it provides a direct measure of sediment oxygenation. This commonly shows whether nutrient enrichment in the estuary exceeds levels causing nuisance anoxic conditions in the surface sediments, and also reflects the capacity of tidal flows to maintain and replenish sediment oxygen levels.

In well flushed sandy intertidal sediments, tidal flows typically oxygenate the top 10cm of sediment. However, when fine muds fill the interstitial pore spaces, less re-oxygenation occurs and the RPD moves closer to the surface.

In response to the presence of fine muds and, to a lesser extent, nutrient enrichment, the RPD depth has decreased at both Whareama sites since 2008 (Figure 4, Table 1). It remained relatively shallow (1-2cm) in 2012, indicating poorly oxygenated sediments. The 2cm RPD at Site A reflects the presence of overlying deposits of relatively coarse marine sand (Figures 5 and 7), rather than improved sediment conditions. The RPD values fit the "fair-poor" condition rating.

2. Results, Rating and Management (Continued)

Figure 5. Eroding marine sands overlying soft muds near Site A in the lower estuary.

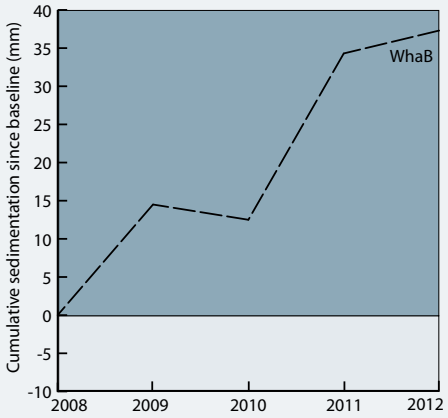

Figure 6. Cumulative change in sediment level from 2008-2012.

Table 1. RPD depth and grain size results, Whareama Estuary fine scale sites, (22 Feb. 2012).

Site	Replicate*	RPD (cm)	% Mud	% Sands	% Gravel
Wha A.	1	1	51.2	48.7	0.1
Wha B.	1	2	70.5	29.5	0

*site composite

Table 2. Sediment plate data, Whareama Estuary (2008-2012).

Site	Sediment Depth (mm)					Change (mm)				Site Mean (mm/yr)				2008-2012 Overall Rate (mm/yr)
	18/1/08	18/1/09	22/1/10	16/1/11	22/2/12	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	
Wha B. 1	182	188	185	202	216	6	-3	17	14	+14.5	-2.0	+21.8	+3.0	+9.3
Wha B. 2	156	170	170	201	199	14	0	31	-2					
Wha B. 3	215	234	232	256	252	19	-2	24	-4					
Wha B. 4	216	235	232	247	251	19	-3	15	4					

2012 SEDIMENTATION RATE RATING

HIGH

CONCLUSION

The very high percentage mud content, the high rate of sedimentation, and "fair-poor RPD" rating, signify rapid infilling of this important area of Whareama Estuary that is contributing to ongoing problems associated with excessive muddiness.

RECOMMENDED MONITORING

It is recommended that monitoring continue as outlined below:

Annual Monitoring. To address problems associated with excessive muddiness and a "fair-poor RPD" rating, monitor sedimentation rate, RPD depth and grain size annually until the situation improves. Therefore the next monitoring is due in Jan-Feb 2013.

Fine Scale Monitoring. It is recommended that a "complete" fine scale monitoring assessment (including sedimentation rate and macroalgal mapping) be undertaken at 5 yearly intervals (next scheduled for Jan-Feb 2015).

Broad Scale Habitat Mapping. It is recommended that broad scale habitat mapping be undertaken at 10 yearly intervals (next scheduled for Jan-Feb 2016-17).

RECOMMENDED MANAGEMENT

The fine scale monitoring results reinforce the need for management of fine sediment and, to a lesser extent, nutrient sources entering the estuary. The GWRC Land Management group continue to develop property plans to manage erosion prone land and these plans now cover almost 30% of the total Whareama catchment (15,949ha). In addition, GWRC have been investigating the installation of a continuous turbidity sensor in the lower reaches of the river (at Waiteko) to help assess sediment inputs from the upstream catchment.

2. Results, Rating and Management (Continued)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Glen and Angie Meredith (Orui Station) for permission to access the estuary, and Juliet Milne and Megan Oliver (GWRC) for their support and feedback.

Figure 7. Anoxic muds underneath recently deposited marine sands in the lower estuary at Site WhaA, 22 February 2012.