

Race for water health issue 5 August 2005

A water-grab of major proportions is underway as Central Plains Water, Synlait, Lynton Dairy and others compete to secure available resources from our big rivers. These resource consent applications have to follow statutory timeframes for approval. The promise of large economic benefits is increasing the pressure for these projects and others across the region to be commissioned before we properly understand some important ramifications for the environment. Consents may be granted to take water, without controlling the use of land where the water is applied, or indeed, knowing how such uses should be controlled.

The 'Canterbury Strategic Water Study', Stage 2, will have identified sites for several major water storage projects across the plains by March 2006. Central Plains Water, the most advanced of these large schemes, is planned to provide water to irrigate 60,000 hectares of the central plains, followed by schemes in North, Mid and South Canterbury.

Environment Canterbury's (Ecan) 'Canterbury Trends and Forecasts 2004' report states that: "Nitrates exceed drinking water standards in localised areas and there are some indications that the intensification of agricultural land uses may be causing increase in nitrate concentrations across the region." As a human health issue, this has to be of real concern, particularly given the lead-time for such contamination to find its way into groundwater systems. What is being measured now probably results from activities of many years ago. In 2004 there was a 25% increase in Canterbury of urea fertiliser application, a major source of nitrates (Dept. of Statistics). While steps are now being taken to protect Christchurch ground-waters, Water Rights Trust is concerned that with escalating irrigation of dry land properties across the Plains, widespread and long term contamination of our region's drinking water is becoming highly probable.

Recommendations from the 'Integrated Research for Aquifer Protection' (IRAP) program comprising research critical to sustainable intensive farming practices are expected to be published during 2010. Likewise, the Ministry for the Environment's 'Water Program of Action' and the 'Growing for Good' report from the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (which recommends fundamental changes to farming systems), and ECan's 'Natural Resources Regional Plan', 'Future Path Canterbury' and

'Long Term Council Community Plan' must all be integrated into decision frameworks. The 'Canterbury Regional Economic Development Study' (CREDS) which encompasses tourism, high technology, educational sectors, water issues, rural development issues and other areas interconnected across the region should be able to inform our decisions more completely on the role of major water storage projects in the overall economic growth of the region.

The 'Canterbury Strategic Water Study', Stage 3, is planned to co-ordinate the results of all of these studies to enable informed community debate, but such debate may be largely irrelevant to some development proposals because of the race to secure water among developers. The many millions of dollars of tax-payers money being spent on these studies, and elsewhere, deserves full recognition of the information produced before we commit to re-engineering the plumbing of the plains.

Many farmers say they will not introduce environmental sustainability measures on their properties if their profitability is reduced. The traditional 'right to farm'; to use land as they see fit, is a view still widely held. Yet, it is as much in the interests of the farming community as other sectors that such a narrow view is not given currency by leaders in the sector. Eventually, land use controls will be imposed, as in the UK, Netherlands and Australia. Such controls are already being considered in the Waikato and Taupo areas and when applied in Canterbury, the basis for many farmers' original investments will probably change to their economic disadvantage. Naturally, strong resistance to such a prospect can be expected. This is another reason why sound economics, and legislation backed by environmental science, must fully inform water management practices prior to putting any major scheme in place. Relying on all developers, farmers and urban citizens to self-manage on these issues has clearly not worked in the past, and there is little evidence to suggest it will in the future.

Shouldn't we be asking now what difference to farming options does factoring in sustainable management practices have for the farmer? What measures are needed where intensive farming is already contaminating our ground-waters, or threatening contamination? Would dairy farming be economically less attractive than viticulture in some areas, for example, if fertiliser application and stocking rates were restricted to levels

that guaranteed that our ground-waters would remain safe to drink? What impact would consideration of such options have on the placement and scale of water storage projects? What about pricing water to encourage efficiency of use and help fund restoration work on rivers and streams? How well should we understand these issues prior to constructing canals, dams, storage lakes and other works that cost a lot of money and have a large footprint on the landscape?

We owe Canterbury better than this. We still have the opportunity to be a world leader in our water management practices, bringing substantial social and economic benefits to future generations. The enormous costs of remedying damage after environmental boundaries have been breached would surely dwarf the front-end costs of a prudent approach.

That Canterbury's pristine ground-waters are threatened by increasing contamination and many of our lowland streams are unfit for human contact already reflects a huge economic subsidy to both urban and rural communities. As a region we must move urgently to recognise the importance of living within our environmental means. We can and must make the necessary adjustments that will allow those people following behind us their due right to the clean, viable ground and surface waters that we were gifted with. Anything short of this is dirty housekeeping. The burden of remedial costs should rightfully rest heavily with our generation: we who are responsible for the mess. This state of affairs emerged largely unnoticed over many years prior to the present Ecan leadership and demonstrates the effect of lax environmental standards and management practices. To continue such foolishness because of legislative inadequacies is economically and morally indefensible and would commit us to unnecessary social conflict.

Murray Rodgers, Trustee, Water Rights Trust