

Dairying destroying our rivers 29 March 2006

My father was a grain and seed buyer in Canterbury. In the primary school holidays I would sometimes accompany him to the Leeston-Southbridge-Lakeside district in his Ford Prefect. Before sampling grain sacks and negotiating deals with local farmers, he would drop me off to graze in a field of peas or watch trout feeding over weed beds in one of the many clear unpolluted spring creeks feeding Lake Ellesmere. In hot weather, I'd take a quick dip in the cold spring water.

Tragically, those days have gone. The once famous trout fishery, the lower Selwyn River, is now virtually dry in summer and grossly polluted by farming. There are warning notices from ECan at Coes Ford about the dangers of swimming in waters full of harmful bacteria. In the 1960s, the spawning run of brown trout was 40,000 fish in this river. Now finding 40 in the lower reaches would be difficult.

Since 1998, the Irwell River flowing parallel to the Selwyn also dries in summer. In 1997, world famous American angler, Mel Kreiger, fished a stretch of the Irwell with us at Brookside and marvelled that we had such a wonderful spring creek full of trout so close to Christchurch. The angling fraternity world wide regards spring creeks as a very special and challenging resource. In the USA, most good spring creeks are bought up privately and rented out to anglers for \$300US per day. There is a waiting list to fish such spring creeks. The Irwell would be similarly revered in the USA.

George Boughton has lived and farmed on the banks of the Irwell at Brookside for 40 years. His father-in-law, Fred Chapman, farmed there before George from 1924. George told me that before 1998, the Irwell had run dry only once in 80 years and the stream has always been full of fish. Now the stream is dry during summer. "When the irrigators start upstream, the water level in my well drops significantly," George said, "and the river dries."

It is now five years since I presented a submission to Ecan on the pollution and degradation of Canterbury's lowland streams. The Holmes Show ran a story after this submission was printed in The Press. I have addressed the Chamber of Commerce at a Federated Farmers seminar, the Green Party, Rotary Clubs, angling clubs, Fish and Game and written numerous articles and letters to MPs. I even tabled a set of revealing 'before and after' photographs of the Irwell River to Ecan councillors at a luncheon but most seemed disinterested and unimpressed. The Canterbury

Water Rights Trust have tirelessly presented their concerns to Ecan and engaged Professor Ian Shaw to publish his findings but Ecan remains unconvinced that there is a water problem. In March 2000, Prof Doug La Follette from Wisconsin warned of the serious pollution that accompanies large scale dairy farming.

NZ Fish and Game launched their 'dirty dairying' campaign in 2001 and although this has generally raised awareness, dairy farmers and even Fonterra themselves continue to pollute rivers. How the Tourism Board continues to promote New Zealand as 'clean and green' when NIWA found 95% of New Zealand's lowland rivers and streams were polluted is a mystery and quite misleading. Tourism earns twice that earned from dairying. One in twenty overseas visitors 'wet a line' in New Zealand so the Tourism Board should be concerned. Tourists come here because of our clean, green image and beautiful landscapes.

In a letter to The Press on 13 February 2001, ECan's water portfolio chairman councillor Mark Oldfield, stated that 'he is committed to ensuring that water quality, flows and levels are not adversely affected by land use.' The Resource Management Act requires that Ecan manage the water resources and resolve issues on the quality and quantity of surface and groundwater. I suggest Mr Oldfield, himself an irrigating dairy farmer, and Ecan have been a dismal failure. Ecan has failed to carry out their statutory obligations under the RMA. Even now they have yet to develop their Regional Water Resources Management Plan yet continue to issue water rights for 35 years. Has the destruction of Canterbury's lowland rivers and streams by unsustainable irrigated dairy farming been worth it? Probably yes from a purely economic viewpoint but the hidden costs such as electricity consumption, aquifer depletion, pollution of the environment and degrading and dewatering of the streams have not been considered. Nor has the pressure to dam more of our irreplaceable rivers for hydro power. Why should the dairy industry benefit from squandering public resources yet be allowed to destroy the environment?

The trout have long gone from streams like the Hawkins, Hororata, Selwyn and Irwell. The Cam, Kaiapoi, Ashley, Cust, Waipara, Ashburton, Hinds, Tengawai, Hae Hae Te Moana, Wahao, Temuka, Ohapi, Pareora, Shag and Kakanui rivers all once offered excellent recreational trout fishing. Now they are both de-watered and polluted from intensively irrigated dairy farming. Even the Tekapo basin 'desert' has recently been invaded by the dairy farmers.

How can this be sustainable? It seems Ecan is happy to continue with issuing water consents.

We now have a serious water problem in Canterbury with wells drying and aquifers at a record low level.

Swimming and picnics by any lowland stream is a health hazard. Lakes Ellesmere and Forsythe are grossly polluted and will remain in this state while their feeder streams have dried. There is little to flush them out. It even appears eels are becoming feminised as a result of water pollution.

At least I have wonderful memories of family picnics at Coes and Chamberlains fords, swimming in the cold spring creeks and occasionally catching a feisty healthy brown trout from a crystal-clear stream. But what about my grandchildren? Now we drive for two hours to fish the high country rivers and lakes and compete with guides and their overseas clients. Is this the price we pay for progress? Perhaps I have lived too long! In the Netherlands, farmers are legally liable to restore any streams they have damaged. What are the costs in Canterbury and who will pay? How can these streams be restored? Have they gone forever? These costs are never considered when the profits from dairy farming are assessed.

Yours faithfully,

John Kent

33c Hackthorne Road

Cashmere, Christchurch 8002

New Zealand

Ph: (03) 337-9370

Send to: silverdoctor@snap.net.nz