

Water Rights Trust Annual Report 2009/2010

After some 9 years of the WRT pressing for action on Canterbury's declining waterways, the Government implemented the ECan Act earlier this year. Trustees have mixed feelings about this legislation. While pleased for the support given to the Canterbury Water Management Strategy (CWMS) in the Act, and the appointment of commissioners to replace ECan councillors, we have concern over the weakening of Water Conservation Orders (WCO) by the Act. The WRT strongly disagrees with the Government's action concerning WCO's. We see this as a major error of judgment by the Government which has eroded the fragile trust building up around the CWMS, and which needs to be re-established. We believe it is important to support whatever efforts are being made to recover lost ground here – before deciding whether it is a lost cause.

We are pleased that the Commissioners have introduced a moratorium on the Hurunui consent applications. The WRT sees this as an opportunity for alternative options to dams on the river to be properly explored. We remain implacably opposed to any intrusion on the river, such as is proposed by Hurunui Water Project, and the solution for North Canterbury farmers must lie in other directions.

We made our concerns over the various aspects of water management in Canterbury clear during a discussion with ECan Commissioners on 12 May. We have always supported the view that water should be removed from governance of the ECan Councillors, (but not necessarily total dismemberment of the ECan Council) because in our experience over the last ten years, despite some improvement, the Council has consistently demonstrated its inability to deal with the water issues satisfactorily. We could not support the political connotations in the 'our vote' part of the "Our water our vote" public gathering in the Square on 13 June. This decision drew mixed reaction, with many associated with the environmental movement being critical of the WRT's position. Many others supported the position we chose to adopt.

An abridged transcript of the letter addressed to Dame Margaret Bazeley and her fellow commissioners reinforcing the points made during our May 12 meeting follows:

The Water Rights Trust holds the view that it is still possible to achieve the best of both worlds – intensive irrigated agriculture on a larger scale than at present, reliable water supplies for farmers; clean, viable rivers and streams suitable for contact recreation and water that is safe to drink from our aquifers. Helping to achieve this outcome is the purpose of the WRT's existence.

Major changes in attitudes and behaviours among many in the rural sector; urgent completion of the CWMS regional plumbing plan; moratoria applied on irrigation schemes currently in the pipeline; and the special issues concerning the Rakaia and Waimakariri Rivers all need to be addressed.

The following are areas of concern held by the WRT:

1. Environmentally sustainable land-use

Major changes are needed to farming practices to reduce contamination of surface and groundwaters across the region to levels that meet acceptable standards. Stringent compliance monitoring for some farmers is essential. Given that the changes necessary are long overdue, particularly with the increasing trends in nitrate contamination across the plains and bacterial contamination of many water bodies, and given the continuing expansion of intensive farming practices which is likely to be building on the problem, there must be an urgent approach to resolving this issue.

2. Regional water management infrastructure

This is still being developed under the CWMS, and there is a need for moratoria to be applied to existing consent applications while this is finalized to ensure the region is not committed to sub-optimal solutions. The long standing Scenario 1 (Harris) model (developed under the CWMS) representing demand and supply options for water across the region needs updating (ie detailing the other scenarios) - based on how much water is actually required and taking account of expected efficiency gains and environmentally sustainable farming practices. Environmental costs still need to be included.

Given the estimated water required:

- we need to establish the alternative means to provide water for North Canterbury farmers other than dams on the Hurunui River above the gorge that would destroy the natural characteristics of this magnificent part of the Canterbury countryside.
- we need to establish the alternative means to provide water for the CPW and other irrigation schemes other than increased run of river extraction from the Rakaia and Waimakariri Rivers.

3. Water Conservation Orders/moratoria

The weakening of Water Conservation Order legislation means that the trust that has been built up in recent years underpinning the CWMS has been badly shaken. By taking a firm and measured approach without the pressure from continuing processing of consent applications to take water for irrigation means that the region stands a much better chance of resolving these complex issues in the best possible way. Moratoria applied to CPW and HWP consent applications and others would help restore confidence that the new legislation is not all about an enforced water grab – which many suspect at present that it may be.

4. Rakaia and Waimakariri Rivers

Investigations are continuing into the reasons for the estimated loss of flow from the Rakaia River of around 30 cumecs between the foothills and the sea which is having a major impact on flows in the lower reaches of the river and river mouth.

We discussed with you concerns held by Richard English pertinent to the Waimakariri River and its relationship to the Avon River and City aquifers. Richard suggests a need for caution in continuing activities which risk encroaching on the base flow of the River until there is more complete understanding. Richard is in discussion with Hugh Thorpe, who has also researched this issue, and we understand that they are in accord with respect to the uncertainty surrounding these matters and the need for further research.

We also understand from discussions with Richard (following our meeting with you) that the impact of projected population growth in the City would have a relatively small impact on base flows of the river, and on its own is not a major issue at this stage. However our major concerns remain with respect to the impacts that reduced flows in the Waimakariri River might have on the overall security of the city's water supply and on the flows in the Avon and its tributaries.

By addressing these issues, Commissioners would swiftly rebuild confidence among many in the validity of the CWMS and the new governance structure.

Perhaps we might plan to meet every couple of months or so for an update of information, progress and views. Don't hesitate to contact me at any time.

Thank you again for the opportunity to meet and we look forward to working with you in any way possible to help secure the future for our region.

Martin Clements and Murray Rodgers continue their involvement with the CWMS Steering Group (refer www.canterburywater.org.nz), with the strategy formally launched 3 September 2009. The CWMS is now moving through implementation stages with the appointment of people to the ten Zonal Committees and the Regional Water Committee. We will monitor the effectiveness of the ECan Commissioners in addressing our concerns over the coming months, while retaining the option to opt out of the CWMS and to adopt direct action.

The WRT continued to present its views through various fora, including rotary groups, U3A, fishing clubs, Lincoln University students, the Land and Water Forum and other organizations concerned to learn about Canterbury water issues. Our views have been sought on various issues by The Press, Radio NZ, TV One and TV3, the Listener, North and South Magazine and Good magazine. Articles produced by WRT have been published by the Press. The WRT was one of the organizers behind the Hurunui Dambusters march on 16 October 2009, attended by some 1500 people. We are of the view that should the WRT need to call on widespread public support to demonstrate to ECan Commissioners and Government dissatisfaction over emerging water issues, that that considerable support would be forthcoming.

We view the appointment of trustee Rex Williams to the ECan Commission as a recognition by Government of the work done over the years by the WRT. Following his appointment, Rex resigned from the WRT. The WRT welcomes the appointment of Professor Ian Shaw and Symon Fillet as new trustees.

We have a continuing need for funding assistance to meet basic requirements in maintaining our web-site, audit fees, occasional travel to Wellington and for assisting with public events.

I would like to thank all Trustees, our secretary, John Sanders and supporters for their assistance and support to Martin and me.

Murray Rodgers
Chairman
July 2010