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Farmers stand up in support of CPW

Today farmers mostly from Selwyn District stood up in support of the proposed Central Plains Water (CPW) irrigation scheme at the resource consent hearing. They presented evidence that the scheme will protect groundwater supplies and introduce environmentally efficient practices, while ensuring farming in the region is viable and prosperous.

Hororata dryland farmer Doug Catherwood pointed out that the scheme would prevent further extraction of groundwater resources in Canterbury. "This would benefit the nation by shutting down hundreds of deep well pumps, thus saving electricity, and by not taking groundwater, therefore increasing natural wetland spring systems on the Canterbury Plains."

Darfield farmer Paul Jarman, a former Ballance Farm Environment Award winner and UK Linking Farming and Environment Programme exchangee, said the scheme would not only improve groundwater recharge, but its proposed environmental best practice code "would ensure that any environmental issues resulting from water use can be mitigated at or near the source."

Ross Keeley, Chairman of both the RITSO Society (a Selwyn water enhancement group) and the Dunsandel Ground Water Users Group, says the scale of CPW was beneficial for regulatory bodies as one consent holder would be responsible for ensuring standards were maintained. "A community scheme of this size has advantages in that it can insist on environmental practices and standards. This would not be possible if such a development was simply undertaken by individual farms."

"This scheme has a good chance of ensuring that such intensification is well planned and the effects appropriately managed. This will benefit not just those of us who farm within the area of the scheme, but also the Canterbury community, the national conscience and perhaps most important of all, those who will eventually consume the outputs of the scheme so that they may go to bed at night with at least a partially full stomach."

Others spoke of the need for a reliable water supply just to ensure the survival of farming in the Central Plains area.

Damon Summerfield, who farms between Darfield and Sheffield, said dryland farms had to expand just to survive. "I would imagine, without a scheme such as CPW, large dryland corporate farms using groundwater, most probably dairy farms, would be the future for the Central Plains area."

While he had introduced measures to mitigate the effects of drought on his farm, he was still severely restricted. "I don't seem to have much choice in what, and when, I can grow to look after the soil in the long term...with irrigation, the flexibility to apply water when most beneficial, will allow me to grow a variety of crops that are not open to me at the moment."

Te Pirita's Geoff Stevenson, who irrigates 264 hectares already, said irrigation secured the productive capability of his land. "Thus allowing me to plan for the future. I farm from year-to-year not day-to-day, as I would have to if I had a farm that wasn't irrigated."

"My farming business has to be productive because I am a price taker not a price maker. This is only possible because of the productivity and reliability we get from irrigation."

William Harrington, a co director of Hopefield Investments which farms in Charring Cross, said contrary to misconceptions the benefit of irrigation didn't fall only to landowners, shareholders and investors. Mr Harrington says, "Because modern farming is so dependent on agricultural service providers a wide range of local suppliers, and consequently their own communities, receive direct benefit from land improvement."

Other farmers, outside the proposed CPW scheme area, also spoke in support of the scheme citing wider economic and social benefits for the Central Plains community.

Retired Dunsandel farmer Peter Chamberlain and son Tim had both lodged submissions in support of the scheme because water storage would help farmers battling dry summer conditions. Mr Chamberlain said the scheme would also take the pressure off groundwater aquifer extraction and reduce water shortages in lowland streams and rivers. He asked for ongoing monitoring to ensure nutrient levels were managed, and for groundwater quality and quantity to be measured.

Pleasant Point farmer Tom Henderson, vice chairman of South Canterbury Federated Farmers, said the Central Plains area could learn a lot from the experiences of those setting up the Opuha Irrigation Scheme.

"A more vibrant and confident community will evolve with people being attracted to Canterbury because of job opportunities and the security that goes with reliable production."

"If the Central Plains Water Trust Scheme goes ahead, then I can see many parallel benefits to the community. The taking, storing and distributing of water for irrigation will provide certainty for farmers and assurance for the wider community. It will also allow the environment to be enhanced through better farm management and planning."

ENDS

Editors note - The farmers giving evidence were Damon Summerfield (Darfield/Sheffield), Geoff Stevenson (Te Pirita), Ross Keeley (Dunsandel), Doug Catherwood (Hororata), Peter Chamberlain (Dunsandel), William Harrington (Charring Cross), Tom Henderson (Pleasant Point), Dr Garth Janson (Leeston/Te Pirita), Paul Jarman (Darfield), John Lay (Irwell) and Brent Rawstron (Halswell/Tai Tapu), Stuart Wright (Sheffield), Hugh Williams (Darfield).

For the full transcripts of the 11 farmers who gave evidence today, please contact Erin Jamieson on 03 365 0081 or 021 743 237.