

Water Enhancement – Opportunity for the Whole Region

Opinion Article by Doug Marsh

Recent correspondence in The Press on the feasibility study into a water enhancement scheme for the Central Plains shows Canterbury people care passionately about this project. So they should. Getting it right will be the first sentence in a new chapter of community affluence for the whole region. Getting it wrong will be a wasted opportunity, effectively robbing future generations of Cantabrians of the chance for continued shared economic and environmental prosperity.

Some of the issues of concern have already been outlined on this page. Some have been mis-understood or mis-represented by correspondents.

Almost two years of complex study cannot be explained in detail in a few paragraphs. This is expanded in the project feasibility reports presented to the Selwyn District and Christchurch City Councils, all available on www.cpw.org.nz, or from libraries or service centres of each council.

Underlying these reports is an absolute commitment to environmental, social and cultural values. Environmental and social responsibility have been foremost in assessing the feasibility of the project to date. Should the project continue, these criteria will remain an absolute priority.

Sustainability has been and will continue to be paramount.

Economic growth is relatively easy to measure and to forecast. However, it is not the reason for this project. Economic benefit is an indicator of the general prosperity of communities. The creation of new jobs is a means to an end. That end including more children in schools, more people in employment, larger populations to justify the retention of healthcare and other community services, more young people finding worthwhile jobs locally and therefore remaining in the region, rather than leaving for the North Island or overseas to further their careers.

Boosting Canterbury's economy will deliver the associated community benefits to the region.

Agriculture leads New Zealand's economic growth. Growing things is something we do well – particularly in Canterbury. Adding a reliable source of water will give farmers greater certainty in their production systems, greatly improving productivity.

Rural communities that gain irrigation see exciting changes. Farmers diversify, typically from dryland sheep farming to viticulture, horticulture, dairying or cropping. A farm without water might barely support one couple with one partner working off the farm. With irrigation and a change in land use they will increase their productivity and income, probably needing to take on staff. This leads to growing rural school rolls, increased activity in sports clubs and services like the library, local store and swimming pool reversing declining standards.

Our regional economy was built by and continues to rely on agricultural production. It

Christchurch City Council has co-funded the studies carried out so far. The city is New Zealand's most important agricultural service centre. If a scheme proceeds, the return on Christchurch ratepayers' investment will be considerable. Central Plains farmers currently spend 39 per cent of their outgoings – \$58 million annually – on goods and services from Christchurch businesses. With irrigation, this is projected to increase to between \$113 and \$134 million per annum.

There is more. An increase in the annual net farm output is likely to generate \$647 million per annum to the Canterbury region through off-farm support and processing. Consolidating this with a similar water enhancement scheme proposed south of the Rakaia River could see Canterbury's economy benefiting by between \$1.1 and 1.7 billion per year, with between 6,000 and 12,000 new jobs created. These are carefully considered and realistic figures, based on other regions where irrigation has provided economic growth and drawn from a series of scenarios examined when projections were undertaken by independent economic analysts – work validated by independent professional peer assessment.

Irrigation is an important part of water enhancement, but not the whole story.

Putting up to 60 cubic metres of water per second onto this area will increase groundwater levels further down the plains. Although not directly connected, this would increase pressure in the Christchurch-West Melton groundwater system from which the city draws its water supply. This could increase flows in the Avon and Heathcote by as much as 20 per cent. Spring-fed tributaries of the two rivers will carry water for longer periods each year. More water in the Avon and Heathcote will mean more water can be extracted from the aquifers to supply the city.

It would be naïve to expect that a sustainable prosperous future for Canterbury can be achieved without significant effort. Many aspects of the proposals need more detailed examination. The \$235 million financial cost of construction, for example, and how water users will fund this, plus the impact of a reservoir on the communities surrounding it and the environmental effects of land use intensification.

The terms of reference for the feasibility study required that these issues be identified, but not that they be fully resolved at this point in the process.

If the two councils decide to keep funding the project, extensive public consultation will continue as resource consent applications are prepared, with the objective of logically answering all issues raised.

More detailed understanding of these issues will develop more expansive answers to the questions that have emerged from the feasibility study. This is the nature of an study such as the one that is being carried out.

The issues are not minor. They are very significant indeed and have certainly not been glossed over. However, it is also apparent, based on the information uncovered through the feasibility study, that each of the potential effects identified should be able to be resolved to the satisfaction of all, if a logical and flexible approach can be

If the decision is made to proceed, a phased four step process has been recommended. This aims to balance minimal risk of public funds against maximum flexibility. The two Councils' ongoing approval would be a precondition at each further stage. This is an opportunity to progress cautiously towards what, on logical examination, appears a compelling vision for the whole region.

Doug Marsh is Chairman of Central Plains Water, the committee jointly set up by Christchurch City and Selwyn District Councils to investigate the possibility of a water enhancement scheme. He is also President of Business New Zealand and the Canterbury Employers' Chamber of Commerce.