

Opinion Piece for The Press – Central Plains Water scheme

The proposed Central Plains Water (CPW) scheme will be the largest private construction project ever undertaken in Canterbury. The economic benefits it will deliver are equally huge, including a \$357 million increase in our region's agricultural output each year plus a further \$485 million revenue from processing it. Overall, the scheme will create 2,400 jobs (1,000 in agriculture and 1,400 in processing) with a total annual economic impact estimated at \$842 million. Its contribution to GDP will be more than \$350 million, the same as a Rugby World Cup – every year.

However in order to build such a project Central Plains Water Ltd must first satisfy the exhaustive technical, safety and environmental requirements needed to gain nearly 100 resource consents from Environment Canterbury and Selwyn District Council. Central Plains' costs involved in the consenting process will exceed \$4 million.

The very fact that the scheme is now within a few months of the critical resource consent hearing stage, is a feat in itself. A comprehensive irrigation scheme for Central Canterbury was first proposed in 1883. However in the last 120 years, other regional schemes successfully attracted central Government funding (including the Rangitata Diversion Race in South Canterbury build in the 1930s and 40s, and the Amuri schemes in North Canterbury) but the majority of the prime agricultural land closest to Christchurch missed out.

Life was breathed back into the concept in 2000 by a feasibility study funded by the Selwyn District Council and the Christchurch City Council. While some Christchurch ratepayers questioned the merits of their council investing in an irrigation scheme beyond their city's boundaries, City Councillors were well aware that Canterbury's rural sector accounts for 60-70% of Christchurch's economic activity and that Canterbury farmers spend around \$750 million every year on goods and services provided by Christchurch businesses.

In 2004, the project received its most recent injection of support when 300 farmers throughout Central Canterbury collectively invested \$4.7 million to help fund the exhaustive resource consent process.

Large construction projects always involve controversy. Like new highways, airport extensions and new routes for electricity transmission lines, it is impossible to avoid impacting on the lives of individuals. But it is unfortunate that controversy is invariably linked with misinformation which, when repeated enough, is eventually perceived as fact.

Foremost of the main 'fictions' surrounding the CPW scheme is that it has failed to consult. The facts are that meetings were first held with landowners in the Waianiwi Valley, which will be flooded by the scheme's proposed water storage reservoir, in August 2001 and continued in 2003 and 2005. Consultation with landowners potentially affected by the siting of the scheme's headrace canals began as far back as 2000. In the last five years, CPW has held an estimated 100 meetings with everyone from potential water users, landowners, conservationists, outdoor enthusiasts,

township committees, tangata whenua and other landowners who will potentially be affected.

The purpose of consultation has not only been to communicate but to identify any potential environmental, social, economic and cultural impacts of the scheme. This has greatly assisted the technical experts to design the scheme so that it avoids or mitigates adverse effects wherever possible. Consultation is ongoing and will continue throughout the resource consenting and construction processes.

Another common myth about CPW is that it is unprecedented for a private company to be granted requiring authority status. The reality is that since 1991 four irrigation companies have been approved as requiring authorities, including the nearby Barrhill Chertsey irrigation scheme in 2003, South Canterbury Waterways, Doubtless Bay Water Supply Company and North Otago Water Harvesting and Irrigation Company.

Some residents in the Coalgate area have become convinced that the proposed dam and storage reservoir represents a danger to their local community. The dam will be constructed so that it meets the stringent safety guidelines established by The International Committee of Large Dams, which sets the benchmarks for dam safety throughout the world.

Objectors also point out that a fault was found in the Waianiwaniwa Valley when it was put forward as a potential site for the Kate Valley Landfill. However this is several kilometres from the proposed CPW dam site. There are no known major earthquake fault lines in the Waianiwaniwa Valley but if a major fault was discovered, it is important to note that many dams in New Zealand including the Clyde Dam are safely constructed on fault lines.

Another widespread misconception is that CPW seeks to use “half the Waimakariri’s current flow”. The river’s minimum flow levels are fully protected by the Waimakariri River Regional Plan set at 41 cumecs (m³/second). However its annual average flow is 130 cumecs and its median flow is 89 cumecs. While CPW has applied to ‘take’ up to 40 cumecs this is not continuous and simply represents the maximum amount of water the scheme could take at one time, when the river’s flow could support that take. The scheme’s average take would only be 9 cumecs.

Some people object to CPW because of its possible effect on the number of ‘fishing days’ on the Rakaia and Waimakariri Rivers. While we continue to consult with Fish & Game on this matter, technical investigations indicate the scheme is unlikely to affect the number of salmon running up either river. As recently as last year, Fish & Game was involved in the development of Environment Canterbury’s Waimakariri River Regional Plan – they did not appeal the minimum flow set by the Plan and were fully aware that future applications for water would potentially involve drawing water down to that level.

If the CPW scheme fails to gain the necessary resource consents to proceed, individual farmers or groups of farmers will continue to apply for water from both rivers. What’s more, because these private irrigation schemes are smaller, their supporting information does not have to meet such high thresholds as those required of CPW. This means that, irrespective of what happens to the CPW scheme, all water available for allocation (up to the limits set by the Rakaia National Water Conservation Order and the Waimakariri River Regional Plan) will ultimately be allocated to individual farmers or small groups of

corporate farmers. This was recently evidenced by applications from corporate dairy farmer Synlait for 6 cumecs from the Rakaia and Ngai Tahu's application for 3.6 cumecs from the Waimakariri.

Central Plains Water argues that it is far better for water to be allocated to a scheme owned in perpetuity by its community via a trust. The overall project has been carefully designed to ensure that farmers receiving water from the scheme will be bound by strict environmental sustainability controls and their collective water shares can never be traded or sold to offshore interests.

Pat Morrison
Chairman, Central Plains Water Limited