



Media Release

Council-backed irrigation scheme has serious and uncertain ramifications

Wednesday 6 June 2007

Yesterday members of the NZ Recreational Canoeing Association attended the extraordinary meeting of the Christchurch City Council which was called to consider the Dairy Holdings et al loan to the Central Plains Water scheme. There were some important points raised by the various speakers which the NZRCA would like to elaborate upon:

The legislative framework is inadequate

The NZ government has recognised that NZ's waterways are under pressure, with iconic water bodies such as Lakes Taupo, Rotorua and Ellesmere suffering from deteriorating water quality, from nitrate leaching due to intensified agricultural practices. It has also been recognised that the RMA allows no cumulative assessment of effects and there is no ability to determine the best use of a resource; in all cases it is first in, first served. This is especially problematic in the case of water. Consequently the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Ministry for the Environment have initiated the Sustainable Water Programme of Action to set national environmental standards and to amend the RMA.

Canterbury is a special case; it is the most irrigated province of New Zealand and is the most at risk of aquifer pollution from faeces and nitrate leaching. Consequently there are also regional initiatives underway such as the Canterbury Strategic Water Study.

The shortcomings of the current legislative framework have been identified not in advance but by the harm resulting to the environment from those shortcomings. Serious initiatives are now underway to fix those shortcomings. It is not appropriate to consider the country's largest and most hazardous irrigation project until these initiatives have been completed. To put it another way, it is no use closing the gate after the horse has bolted.

It's too hard

Yesterday there seemed to be attitudes within council that

- if CPW is halted, another similar project will simply take its place
- that new legislation will take too long
- and that it is too difficult to put a moratorium on new projects.

This is not good enough. The fact that councillors are a bit fuzzy with the relevant points of legislation is not sufficient grounds to blindly continue with a project which has serious and uncertain ramifications for our children and our children's children. Murray Rogers of the Water Rights Trust admitted that they have not yet had a reply from the Minister from the Environment about their request to hold CPW. This is no excuse not to make a similar request. A request to hold all major extraction consents, coming from Christchurch City Council and Environment Canterbury would hold much more weight than from a regional environmental organisation. Given that Canterbury is the province most at risk it is difficult to imagine that the Minister could possibly deny such a request.

CPW asking the council to fly blind

Murray Rogers, and some of the councillors in their questions, mentioned the lack of expert knowledge of side effects. There are indeed huge unknowns in the downstream effects of the scheme, including Christchurch drinking water. The CPW Assessment of Environmental Effects (June 6, 2006, Section 8.6) has this to say about the effects on Christchurch City springs and aquifers:

"The modelling study of Aqualinc (2005b) showed that the CPWE Scheme will result in a small increase in flow in the spring-fed rivers that drain through Christchurch (The Avon and Heathcote Rivers, see Table 8-9 above). From the groundwater flow lines shown by Hayward (2002) the Avon River is unlikely to receive any water directly from the Scheme area, and the increased flow will be due to a pressure effect related to the increase in groundwater level. The small increase in Heathcote River flow may in part be Scheme water, although this will be a very small proportion given the peak irrigation rate on all the affected land will be only 200 L/s, and much of this will be used by plants and not contribute to groundwater."

What goes completely unmentioned anywhere in the AEE is that by far the majority (more than 80% according to NIWA) of the recharge of the Christchurch City aquifers comes from the Waimakariri River. Given that CPW are applying for a consent to take up to 40 cumecs (ie 44.9% of the median flow) from the Waimakariri, it is almost certain that in fact the Christchurch aquifer recharge will be reduced. There is absolutely no acknowledgement in the AEE that such a risk exists.

The NZRCA believes it is critical that more work is done to investigate such impacts before proceeding with this scheme.

Misinformation and confusion

One of the speakers yesterday, Ashburton District Council Chief Executive Brian Lester, alluded to misinformation about the CPW scheme. This was most ironic given where most of the misinformation has originated.

The immediately preceding speaker, Ashburton Mayor Bede O'Malley, mentioned driving across the bank-to-bank flooded Rakaia recently, and mused that just a small proportion of that water would meet all the regions needs. This indeed was the sales pitch when CPW was established, it was to be a water harvesting scheme skimming off the high flows. However the CPW scheme is not water harvesting and never has been. If you read both the earliest (6 December 2001) and latest (23 June 2006) CPW Assessment of Environmental Effects, it bluntly states that this is a run of the river scheme.

"The order of priority of source shall be as follows:

- Supply from available run of river water in the Rakaia River (subject to sharing with the Ashburton Community Water Trust - ACWT),*
- Supply from available run of river water in the Waimakariri River,*
- Supply from storage during periods when run of river water is not available to meet the demand. "*

A recent example of misinformation comes from Federated Farmer's Frank Brenmuhl. In the Listener article of just this week, he is quoted as saying *"we have no evidence to say that increases in dairying are going to have a deleterious effect on waterways"*. This statement flies in the face of all research to date, both nationally and internationally, and of the very evidence that caused the government to initiate the Sustainable Water Programme of Action.

Conclusion

It is the NZRCA's position that this scheme has serious and uncertain ramifications for the city and region, and for future generations. It behoves councilors to make a considered and

informed choice. With the current state of knowledge and legislation it is not possible to make such a choice at this time. Consequently the NZ Recreational Canoeing Association requests that the City Councilors approve no more spending on CPW at this time and that a request for a moratorium on all major Canterbury consents is submitted to the Ministry for the Environment.

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