

Community engages with irrigation project

The prospect of irrigating the Wairarapa valley has attracted interest and involvement from wide sections of the Wairarapa community.

Interest groups drawn from environmental, recreational, iwi, rural and business sectors have completed their first round of briefings with members of the project's leadership and working groups. A series of briefings has provided initial project information and heard questions, issues and views of each group. The three district councils were also briefed at their combined meeting in October.

"This has now become a community-wide project," said Wairarapa Regional Irrigation Project leadership group chair Fran Wilde, who is also chair of Greater Wellington Regional Council. "Briefings over the last two months have provided excellent feedback and involvement of key groups who have a role to play in helping develop a viable and environmentally sustainable project. No one has told us it's a bad idea."

Under the irrigation proposal, water would be "harvested" from rivers at times of high flow and stored for release during dry periods. Various engineering studies over the past five years have identified potential water storage sites on private farmland. The Tararua Forest Park will not be used for storage and rivers themselves will not be dammed.

Community engagement was the first priority agreed by a high-level governance group established in September to oversee the development of a regional water and irrigation project which has the ability to transform Wairarapa's future.

"We have identified how we will work together and tasks to be completed", said Ms Wilde. "While there was general acceptance by interest groups of the proposed project and process of engagement, the big issues of environmental viability, scheme options, capital funding, land ownership and process costs need to be addressed."

Each interest group will participate further in project development and receive information and updates on progress. A joint meeting of the four groups is planned for the new year.

Quantifying the environmental risks and benefits was identified as a task to be done with the involvement of the environmental/recreational group. A representative of that group has joined the leadership group which will meet for the second time next week.

Ms Wilde said increased avenues for public involvement will be developed in the near future.

“We have re-established discussions with rural land users who were brought up to date with developments since the trust was formed and have sought their ongoing involvement in the development of viable options,” said Wairarapa Regional Irrigation Trust chair Bob Tosswill.

“There was general recognition that a key challenge is resolving environmental issues that arise from changed land use as a result of irrigation. We will be collectively addressing these over the coming months,” Ms Wilde said.

“Water is a significant resource for everyone and we will work with others involved to do the right thing with it in our region,” said Jason Kerehi of Rangitāne o Wairarapa. “This idea has potential to bring great prosperity to Wairarapa.”

“This work on the irrigation project is timely given we are just embarking on a new approach to the development of our regional plan, looking at more integrated management of resources and encouraging land owners to take more ownership of sustainable resource management,” Fran Wilde said.

“A viable irrigation scheme would future-proof the productive capacity of the Wairarapa valley land, with potential for new uses that will bring jobs for locals,” said Ms Wilde.

Two major studies are near completion and will be reported to the project’s leadership group at its second meeting to be held next week. One is an investigation of a capital and ownership model by KPMG and the other an economic evaluation by Nimmo-Bell and BERL to quantify the benefits of irrigation in Wairarapa and a cost benefit analysis of total community return on each dollar invested in irrigation.

“Other schemes we have studied have priority use of water with environmental being the first,” said Ms Wilde. “It’s not all about irrigation, it’s about how to use the water to gain a range of

benefits. Potential environmental benefits of the project include the ability to supplement flow and provide environmental flows to refresh the river.

The 11-member leadership group represents the three Wairarapa district councils, iwi groups Rangitāne o Wairarapa and Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, Greater Wellington Regional Council, the Wairarapa Regional Irrigation Trust, the environmental/recreational interest group and Grow Wellington.

The environmental/recreational group consists of representatives of the Department of Conservation, Forest & Bird, Fish & Game, Sustainable Wairarapa, White Water NZ, Federated Mountain Clubs and the Green Party.

Along with other regions in New Zealand, Wairarapa faces decreasing water availability, climate change and the increased likelihood and frequency of drought.

Preliminary studies indicate great potential for irrigating land that currently does not have access to water for that purpose.