



## Media information, 1 December 2015

### Demand and environment priorities in water study

Understanding more about likely demand for irrigation water, environmental impacts and the suitability of dam sites were priorities for ongoing investigations into the feasibility of water storage schemes that would create significant economic growth for the Wairarapa and Wellington regions.

Following almost five years of work, two schemes emerged earlier this year as preferred options for irrigating almost 30,000 hectares of the Wairarapa valley and providing water for other uses.

Wairarapa Water Use Project director, Michael Bassett-Foss said new and more detailed investigations that aimed to establish scheme feasibility by the end of 2016 were well underway.

“Water storage presents significant opportunities for the whole region. We need to know more detail about the biggest risk areas – commercial, environmental and geotechnical. If these studies provided enough certainty to proceed, the project would move into a new commercial entity that would raise further funding and the capital needed.”

Crucial to feasibility, and the attraction of commercial investment, was establishing demand for water, land use options and farmer appetite for investing in irrigation.

“We are continuing to talk one-on-one with farmers about this and are using three local farms to study the viability of seven irrigated land uses on different soil types.”

Mr Bassett-Foss said the results would be communicated with farmers early next year before an independent survey to understand their collective preferences for scheme ownership, buying irrigation water and land use.

This summer would see geotechnical drilling at the two dam sites, Black Creek and Tividale, to test the suitability of the dam foundations. Other fieldwork planned for next year aimed to assess the land-based and aquatic ecology of the storage sites and the surrounding areas.

In a separate but related project, the Wairarapa community, through the Ruamāhanga Whaitua committee was working towards setting water quality and quantity limits for the catchment which would regulate the activities that could be undertaken. As part of this, Greater Wellington Regional Council had brought together more than 30 experts, including some of New Zealand’s most respected independent scientists, who were combining scientific, cultural and community

knowledge to help the committee make decisions about future management of land and water in the catchment.

Mr Bassett-Foss said it was expected that the scientists would test a scenario based on storing water for irrigation and environmental uses. It would predict effects on the environment and how storage could be used to more efficiently manager water across the catchment.

He said community interests representing iwi, local government, business, environmental and recreational interests continued to provide valuable feedback and input into project design and decisions.

Since 2010 Wairarapa water investigations have been led and funded by the Greater Wellington Regional Council, with support from the Government's Irrigation Acceleration Fund.

Full project information including all reports are available at [www.wairarapawater.org.nz](http://www.wairarapawater.org.nz)

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## **Background**

The Wairarapa Water Use Project (WWUP) is investigating a multi-purpose water scheme for Wairarapa to collect and store water, then distribute it for a variety of economic and community uses. The scheme would improve regional prosperity while promoting sustainable management of land and water.

More specifically, WWUP aims to:

- Provide an affordable, economically efficient and resilient water supply to support rural and/or urban demand, enabling broader economic benefits;
- Contribute to wider initiatives to improve the resilience, efficiency and reliability of the Ruamāhanga catchment water resource.

Work to date has focused at a high level on how water could be provided to irrigate an additional 30,000 hectares of the Wairarapa valley through a series of schemes. Currently, about 12,000 hectares are irrigated using surface and ground water, most of which is fully-allocated.

WWUP is sponsored and funded by the Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC). It has co-funding from the Ministry for Primary Industries' Irrigation Acceleration Fund (IAF) which primarily supports investigation into regional rural water harvesting, storage, and distribution infrastructure.

The project involves wide sections of the community through its Governance Group, Leadership Group, Stakeholder Advisory Group, Farmer Group and Rural Bankers Group.

## **Economic and social factors**

A greater, more reliable water supply in Wairarapa would grow the primary production base, creating long-term and inter-generational economic and social development. Benefits could include:

- increased farming productivity and returns
- a more diverse and higher-value range of agricultural and horticultural outputs
- creation of new jobs and increased regional GDP

- retention of younger people in the region through greater job prospects
- local processing of primary produce made possible through more reliable production
- new and expanded service industries e.g. transport
- social spin-offs – community facilities, population-based services, strong school rolls.

### **Environmental factors**

Potential environmental benefits being considered by the project include:

- better long-term, catchment-wide management of Wairarapa's stressed water resources
- supplementing low summer river flows
- improving fresh water quality by addressing land management issues
- managing the inevitable 'natural' growth in demand for use of summer-time surface and ground water.

Increased irrigation is likely to bring environmental challenges, particularly those associated with more intensive land use. Understanding potential land use change and its environmental effects is a key consideration for WWUP and the community.

In a catchment-wide approach to land and water management, the Greater Wellington Regional Council is facilitating a community-led vision for land and water use in Wairarapa as part of the Regional Plan review. Several projects will be influenced by this, including the WWUP.

All of this work is underpinned by substantial scientific programme, involving national partners, that is building a repository of evidence on what to base decisions.

The local community, through the Ruamāhanga Whaitua (catchment committee) will set the vision for the catchment. Using a collaborative process it will determine community values and needs, then recommend how land and water resources are managed and regulated through the new Regional Plan.

### **Project history**

The question of how to increase the reliable supply of water through storage has been considered in Wairarapa for several decades. Formal investigations of possible water storage schemes in Wairarapa date back to 2001.

In 1997 a significant drought attracted a Central Government-funded research project. Between 2001 and 2003 local economic development agencies commissioned several studies that showed that water storage was both feasible and advantageous for Wairarapa.

In 2007 the Wairarapa Regional Irrigation Trust (WRIT) built on initial investigative work. Working with Meridian Energy, it led preliminary studies that indicated strong potential for increased irrigation.

Since 2010, the GWRC and IAF-funded investigations have included an initial scoping study, an Options Identification and Analysis Phase, an Options Refinement Phase, and a Prefeasibility Phase that in June 2015 narrowed the scheme options down to two, Black Creek and Tividale.