



Media information

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Water project picks up pace

Investigations into increasing the supply and reliability of water in Wairarapa will pick up pace next year, while a new community-led process to maintain and improve water quality in the Ruamāhanga catchment begins.

The Wairarapa Water Use Project is investigating the viability of one or more multi-purpose water schemes that would collect and store water then distribute it for a variety of economic and community uses in an environmentally sustainable way.

Project director Michael Bassett-Foss said work over the next 12 months aimed to identify one or more of the most favourable schemes that could undergo a detailed full-feasibility study in 2015. Others would be discounted if they were found not to be suitable.

Water use project investigations will run alongside related work by the newly-appointed Ruamāhanga Whaitua catchment committee. The Whaitua will collaborate on land and water management recommendations that will inform the Greater Wellington Regional Plan which sets the rules for how natural resources can be used.

In September this year five water storage sites at Tividale, Black Creek, Te Mara, Mangatarere and White Rock Road areas were selected for priority investigation and three others were identified as reserve options.

Work to date has largely focused at a high level on how to provide irrigation water to about 42,000 hectares of the Wairarapa valley from south of Martinborough to north of Masterton. "The reality is that if one scheme or combination of schemes is found to be viable, a staged approach will be needed. The question we need to answer is where to start," Mr Bassett-Foss said.

Next year's work will investigate each scheme and its possible effects individually, while the broader, more long-term concept of a series of schemes throughout Wairarapa will remain a background consideration.

“Feedback from the community and landowners directly, and through a series of public drop-in days and the project’s Stakeholder Advisory Group has, where possible, been incorporated into the 2014 work programme.”

The work plan will build on previous work and introduce new areas of study including high-level social and cultural impact assessments, geotechnical testing, assessments of on-farm economic returns and wider costs and benefits to the community. Environmental science work will consider water availability, aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and the effects of more intense land use. Potential funding models, governance options and planning implications will also be looked at.

“We will be focusing on identifying things that would absolutely prevent scheme development to enable faster decision making and remove uncertainty,” Mr Bassett-Foss said. “For example geotechnical testing of a water storage site may show that the ground is not suitable for holding water or it is too expensive to engineer.”

The work to identify scheme options for further investigation was jointly funded by the Greater Wellington Regional Council and the Ministry for Primary Industries’ Irrigation Acceleration Fund (IAF). Further funding is being sought from IAF for the next stage of investigation. “The next stage will draw on the experience of other parts of the country to provide the Wairarapa community with more certainty about the potential for irrigation development,” Irrigation Acceleration Fund manager Kevin Steel said.

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