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Two water scheme options advanced in Wairarapa study

Two options for schemes to store and distribute water in Wairarapa have been selected for a feasibility study, following investigations of six options carried out over the past 18 months.

The two schemes selected, Black Creek and Tividale, between them could irrigate almost 30,000 hectares between north of Masterton and southwest of Greytown to the north of Lake Wairarapa, and provide water for other uses. Storage reservoirs would be in the Kaituna area west of Masterton and the Taueru catchment northeast of Masterton respectively. Black Creek incorporates a smaller option, Wakamoekau, which has the potential to be a stand-alone scheme.

The Wairarapa Water Use Project has spent four years investigating how water could be collected, stored and distributed for a variety of uses including irrigation, environmental, power generation, municipal water, recreational and cultural. It aims to improve long-term regional prosperity while promoting sustainable management of land and water.

The last phase of work, 'prefeasibility', broadly compared six schemes on financial, engineering, social, environmental and cultural criteria in order to narrow the options down.

The three other schemes considered - Te Mara, Mangatarere and White Rock Road - have been discounted from further study by the project. Three others previously kept in reserve have also been discounted.

Project chairman, Bob Francis, said information gathered to date had not identified major flaws in any of the six options investigated and all were in the range of affordability. "However, some schemes had large overlaps in their distribution areas and choices had to be made based on that and an extremely thorough process of comparing the schemes based on multiple criteria."

Mr Francis said since 2010 the project had involved wide community interests through several dedicated advisory groups representing iwi, business, environmental and recreational interests, as well as local and central government. "Their feedback and input into project design and decisions has been hugely valuable."

Water storage has been considered in Wairarapa for many years and has the potential for significant long-term economic and social gains. An independent study last year concluded that irrigating an additional 30,000 hectares would add \$157 million of GDP to the greater Wellington region per year and create 1,200 new jobs. A further \$90 million in GDP would be added and more than 1,100 jobs created for one

year as a one-off result of farmers converting to irrigation. The one-off effects of scheme infrastructure construction and any spin-off from new processing of primary produce would be additional.

“We understand the environmental challenges of increased irrigation and changing land use, and also how to make a scheme affordable to users,” Mr Francis said. “On the other hand, there are opportunities to help improve the resilience, efficiency and reliability of the Ruamāhanga catchment water resource. These and other questions are highly complex but that does not mean solutions can’t be found by working as a community and that is the approach we will continue to take.”

In a separate project, the Wairarapa community, through the Ruamāhanga Whitua committee, is working to decide its values and needs around freshwater. Over the next year it will create a legal framework for the management of freshwater and this will become part of the Regional Council’s new Natural Resources Plan. Any water scheme developed would need to operate within the water quality and quantity limits set under the Plan. Council Chair Fran Wilde said the new draft Plan is about to be notified and that the intense community involvement in the Whitua Committee would hopefully help the completion of the Plan process without undue delay.

Wairarapa Water Use Project director, Michael Bassett-Foss said scheme construction costs had been estimated within a range that reflected the ‘prefeasibility’ stage of investigation. Independent experts estimated the net present cost of building the Black Creek scheme at between \$138 million and \$205 million; and Tividale between \$71 and \$105 million.

“Importantly, these cost ranges do not translate directly to the price of water to users or the cost of a scheme to investors,” Mr Bassett-Foss said. “We have provided the cost estimates for transparency purposes but a great deal more work is needed before the real cost of water is known. This includes work on funding structures and water uptake rates, and optimising scheme costs. Cost ranges have been reduced since preliminary studies and will be further refined these during the next phase of work.”

“There is a lot more work to be done in all areas and by the end of the feasibility study, we need to know whether the scheme/s are feasible so we can then go onto seeking resource consent.” The 18-month study will cost approximately \$4 million and will be funded jointly by Greater Wellington Regional Council and the Government through its Irrigation Acceleration Fund.

All project reports that are not commercially sensitive are publicly available on the project website www.wairapawater.org.nz “There is a wealth of information, much of it quite complex,” Mr Bassett-Foss said. “We understand that people have questions so are more than happy to discuss and answer these as far as possible.”

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