



Media information

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Dry year highlights water storage benefits

The rationale for current investigations into the viability of large-scale water storage in Wairarapa has been brought into stark reality through the dry conditions experienced over the last six weeks throughout the region.

“The current very dry soil conditions and low river levels in Wairarapa highlight the opportunity the region has to store water for use in the environment, farming and other purposes,” Wairarapa Water Use Project chairman Bob Francis said.

The Wairarapa Water Use Project (WWUP) is investigating options for storage-based water schemes and how they could provide water to the region of a variety of uses in an environmentally sustainable way. Once water is stored, possible uses include environmental, irrigation, stock water, urban use, recreation, electricity generation and frost fighting.

“Stored water is reliable water,” Mr Francis said. “Our region has an abundance of water over the year, but it’s not in the right place at the right time.” Up to six metres of rain falls in the Tararua Ranges per year while parts of the valley receive only 800mm per year, a small fraction of this.

Greater Wellington Regional Council figures show Wairarapa rainfall, soil moisture levels and river levels are well below average levels for this time of year with north and eastern parts of the Wairarapa receiving between just eight and twenty percent of average rain in January while the Tararua Ranges and foothills received only ten to twenty percent. The lowest flows in rivers and streams typically occur later in February to April so there is an increased chance of a more extreme low flow scenario developing later on.

Restrictions of water taken from wells and creeks by farmers who already irrigate in Wairarapa have come on earlier this year and lasted longer than usual.

“Water storage is not just a drought-fixer,” Mr Francis said. “It’s about providing confidence year-in, year-out to enable increased farm productivity which has positive flow-on effects to the entire Wellington region through jobs, new processing, service industries and revitalisation of rural communities.

“Capturing water that runs off the Tararua Ranges in the winter also has the potential to benefit some rivers and streams during the dry summer months. Some of the stored water would be set aside to be used to increase the minimum amount of water flowing in some creeks and rivers in the dry summer months,” Mr Francis said.

“Primary production is the lifeblood of our community and the biggest single contributor to Wairarapa GDP at 17 percent. We have the opportunity to grow this by making stored water available for irrigation and new crops, pastoral farming and processing, while insulating against dry years.

“When you look at a comparable areas such as South Canterbury where there is more widespread irrigation, including from water storage, their primary sector is strong but they also have a robust manufacturing and service sectors dominated by primary produce, enabled by water and strong primary production.”

WWUP investigations are complex and cover economic, environmental, engineering, social and cultural aspects. The current stage of pre-feasibility work which began a year ago is still at a high level and aims to narrow the options and identify whether any of the schemes are viable.

Project director Michael Bassett-Foss said work to date has focused on options for providing water to irrigate up to 30,000 additional hectares of the Wairarapa valley through one or more schemes. Currently, about 12,000 hectares are irrigated using surface and ground water, most of which is fully allocated.

“Part of the investigation involves talking with farmers to help identify areas of demand where water is likely to be needed and matching it with what could be possible from storage dam options,” Mr Bassett-Foss said.

The investigations are jointly funded by the Greater Wellington Regional Council and the Irrigation Acceleration Fund (IAF) which is administered by the Ministry for Primary Industries. Since 2012, more than 30 initial scheme options have been narrowed down to five, with these to be further narrowed in the middle of this year to undergo a full-feasibility study.

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