

GROWING IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE IN NEW ZEALAND

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The season ahead is a critical time for irrigation development. Climate change predictions and current weather events are driving the need for a reliable water supply for irrigation.

However, lower commodity prices, resulting in weaker balance sheets, are making short-term affordability challenging. Add to this the future uncertainty, but the likely increased investment required around farm nutrient management expectations, alongside the need for catchment scale environmental infrastructure to be developed in parallel, and life can become daunting for some.

So what's the answer? Drivers for uptake have never been greater, just ask a north Canterbury farmer whether he'd like water for irrigation at the farm gate or not... Cantabrians get droughts and what irrigation provides – that's not the issue!

The challenge in Canterbury is overcoming uptake affordability issues and the associated financing challenges this can create for scheme development.

The reality is all new infrastructure pushes risk appetite to its limits. The question potential irrigators now ask is 'how am I going to intensify my farm system so I can service the increased debt whilst meet my future nutrient limits, when I'm not 100% sure what future expectations will be?'

Some of the answer lies in both proponents and Councils better communicating the alternate futures. There's risk in a future with or without irrigation, the status quo today is not the status quo tomorrow, from both a regulatory and climatic perspective. You're going to be impacted which ever route you go down. Many don't get this... so there is a need for investment in this message.

There's also considerable investment required in the future shareholder engagement process, to work through their opportunities and help narrow down feasible options. Schemes, with support from the banking and other sectors, are doing a great job with this. This is a complex task, and with scale it becomes even more so.

For the environmental infrastructure there's a need to better understand who is going to be responsible for it, what's the structure that's going to drive its investigation, development and operation, and importantly who is going to pay for it? A simple 'where do the benefits lie' will help determine this.

As for environmental limits... they are what they are. Most have become accepting that post the challenges of the plan process a successful future is about change, the clear articulation of

Good Management Practice expectations and beyond. Irrigation schemes and industry bodies are key to this. We're pleased to see the implementation approach ECan is taking, and look forward to working with ECan staff in the successful delivery of this. But we should also note there's still a way to go with how schemes best manage nutrient allocations.

To date government, through IAF funding, has played a key role in helping us work through the challenges. There's always been far more to irrigation development than built infrastructure and its financing, in fact that's the relatively easy bit, particularly post the governments introduction of the NPS-FM. It's the 'social licence to operate' and the 'herding cats' components that have always been the challenge.

CIIL investment in over-build or any uptake gap, along with a 'public contribution towards the environmental infrastructure components of schemes', as legitimised through the recent fourth LAWF report, also have significant roles to play in getting schemes over the line and we're looking forward to investments being made in both areas during 2016.

SMART Irrigation Campaign

This summer, from late November through to February, INZ will be piloting a SMART Irrigation campaign. There are two target audiences for the campaign:

- Irrigators – SMART Irrigation
- Home gardeners – SMART Watering

The pilot has support from 4 district councils (Waimakariri, Selwyn, Ashburton & Timaru), Environment Canterbury and product suppliers. Good news case studies and information sheets will be used through various media and an updated SMART Irrigation website, to widely communicate Good Management Practice Irrigation (SMART Irrigation / Watering). Importantly the campaign will link water use in garden and farm, sending a message that 'we're all in this together'. Suppliers will benefit through profiling their range of available technologies, Councils will use the messaging to help them better manage during times of municipal restrictions (one Council has gone as far as running with the campaign instead of restrictions... so there's no pressure on us) and in the rural space INZ will be sending a 'how to better manage your allocation during an El Nino event' message, particularly given a number got themselves in trouble last year.

There is much media interest in the campaign and we look forward to everyone's support.

SMART Irrigation PGP

The SMART Irrigation PGP project has recently been approved by MPI and we'd like to thank ECan for its letter of support. INZ are now entering into contract phase. This includes; confirmation of co-funders; setting up the Irrigation Knowledge and Innovation centre; and the contract itself.

The project enables a \$7million investment in capability building within the irrigation sector over the next 5 years. The focus areas being;

- development of a farm decision support tool, development through operation and maintenance, that integrates, adds to and provides reporting from the many existing tools;
- enhancing INZ's knowledge and training provision, adapting the considerable existing resources, to a module format that can be easily re-packaged for the end user, as well as the provision of additional opportunities, for example developing career pathways within the service industry
- providing a structured framework for irrigation innovation in NZ including a research and development strategy, technology scouting programme and an innovation hub.

So it's exciting times ahead for irrigation...