

Ngaruroro saga — a lesson in what not to do

In the Ngaruroro Valley in Hawke's Bay, farmers and horticulturalists recently discovered that their regional council didn't know how much ground water was available for all the permits they had issued.

The start of this fiasco occurred in the lead-up to the renewal of existing permits. The regional council discovered that its "model" for measuring and allocating water couldn't - excuse the pun - hold water. They discovered that they over-allocated the water resource.

The regional council knew the Iwi, Fish and Game and DoC weren't happy with the regional council's pseudo science but they let all the existing permit holders endure the gauntlet of a publicly notified resource consent process anyway.

To the surprise of many consent holders, after paying the \$900 application deposit, the regional council then asked consent holders to commission scientific reports on the effect of the bores on the river.

Asking neighbouring owners of bores to provide separate scientific reports involves a replication of effort. Upon receipt of those reports, however, the regional council scientists assessed them, they brought in an expert from Canterbury to peer review them and the hearing commissioners then made a decision on them. All this work could have been done by one person.

The decisions on all the permit applications were exactly what everyone expected. Almost all got the same amount of water as their previous permit and meters are to be fitted so the regional council can properly monitor the resource.

Those applicants who did not supply the requested scientific reports received similar consent conditions as those who did provide reports. Effectively, being unco-operative saved them \$5000.

What has upset most is that for their troubles the permit holders each received a bill of over \$5000 per bore from the regional council for processing their application in addition to their \$900 deposit. The council simply added up all their costs (\$355,871.88) and split it evenly between the 66 bores - regardless of the amount of water used.

The regional council has effectively treated



every application like a blank cheque to take permit holders on a process where the blind was leading the blind. To make matters worse, the regional council has bumped into everything on the way including DoC, Iwi and Fish and Game.

The regional council is now defending the permits issued through the Environment Court. Also, almost all permit holders have objected to their additional charges.

The regional council is in an avoidable position. They should have reassessed the

permits for a short period, set an advanced warning system for minimum water flow and then require that meters be installed so they could monitor the resource in order to make a better informed decision in the future.

The Ngaruroro saga should be a lesson in what not to do. What concerns me is that a pattern has been set that could ripple throughout the country that generates unnecessary costs, delays and a poorer quality of decision making.

In the aftermath, there has been a round of meetings where a Canterbury-based industry group called Irrigation NZ is suggesting Hawke's Bay bore users join their group to represent a "unified" voice against the regional council.

Sounds like a good idea? In a recent survey, Environment Canterbury recently won the wooden spoon for the worst

performing council in the country - partly attributed to the complexity of the "unified" processing of resource consents.

Environment Minister Dr Nick Smith called them "hopeless" at processing consents on time. Meanwhile, Irrigation NZ is now headed by the former water strategic advisor at Hawke's Bay Regional Council, Andrew Curtis, who was implicated in the Ngaruroro mess.

In other words, it's a case of paying someone else (Irrigation NZ) to pay someone else (scientists) to do someone else's job (the regional council) that you've already paid for through rates.

All it takes is one ratepayer to remind the regional council to do its job. It's the law - politics has nothing to do with it.

• Grant McLachlan is a planning law specialist

RURAL DIARY

A selection of events happening around the country this week.

September 9

NZ International Film Festival opens in Nelson, until September 24. www.nziff.co.nz

September 9-10

Deer velvet suppliers meeting. Speakers from NZ Velvet Marketing Ltd and PGG Wrightson.
September 9: Greta Valley Hotel, 12pm. Kaikoura, The Lobster Inn 6pm. September 10: Blenheim, The Chateau Marlborough, 12pm. Richmond Veterinary Centre, 6pm. www.nzvm.co.nz

September 9-10

FAR family employment relationships workshop, September 9, 11am-3pm, Kingsgate Hotel, Palmerston North. Staff retention workshop, September 10, 9am-4pm, Angus Inn, Hastings. Contact FAR office 03 325 6353.

September 11

Biodynamic orchard workshop, at Jeannie Laing's Organic Orchard, 263 Rea Rd, Katikati, 10am. No charge. BYO lunch. Programme: Biodynamic compost making, orchard walk, 500 mixing and applying, planting calendar. RSVP: Jeannie Laing, 07 5491220, email: Jeannie_627@msn.com

September 13

Carterton Daffodil Carnival. Wander around 120 craft and produce stalls in the main street and take a shuttle bus to Middlemarch to pick your daffodils for a gold coin donation. Shuttle bus leaves from the clock tower on the half hour from 10.30am. Adults \$5, kids \$2. Part of the month-long Wairarapa Spring Festival. www.wairarapanz.com



September 14-17

Tectra level 2 and 3 wool handling course, Wanganui. Courses run subject to numbers. Contact: David Long on (06) 357 1321 or 027 490 0749. www.tectra.co.nz

• Send listings to catherine.healy@ruralpress.com

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