

Submission on Application

Resource Consent Number: CRC040428

Applicant: Waihao Downs Irrigation Ltd

Waimate District Council

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**Public Consultation Participation
to the Waihao Downs Irrigation Ltd**

Good morning Commissioners, my name is John Coles Mayor of the Waimate District Council.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to present my council's submission in support of the Waihao Downs Irrigation application to take water from the Waitaki River.

We did not hesitate to make a submission because we have been a strong supporter of this scheme. I wish to explain the nature of this support and why we believe we have our community's backing for our stance in more detail, but firstly want to outline why we are doing so.

In brief, the Waimate District Council believes this scheme is integral to the economic and social well-being of our community and is essential if the present pattern of growth we are experiencing is to continue.

Of course, it is all very well for the Council to take this view but we are also firmly convinced that our stance represents the opinion of the majority of our community. We base this view on the feedback we have gleaned through our active contribution to the consultation process that has surrounded the Waihao Downs Irrigation project since its beginnings.

Nearly a year ago, on Tuesday, November 27 2007, our council hosted a public meeting to enable local people to air their views on the project. Nearly 50 District residents attended.

During the meeting I explained that the Council had already made submissions in support of the South Canterbury Irrigation Trust's and Meridian Energy's Hunter Downs Scheme and had supported the reduction of the minimum flow from 150 cumecs to 100 cumecs. We heard a wide range of comments covering economic, environmental, social and cultural viewpoints. I mention this today because I believe it indicates the Council's longstanding support of projects that we regard as having benefit for our region.

The Council's backing of this scheme included support for the non-complying aspect of the application with regard to the point at which water abstraction from the river should cease. Council believed this was a change that was essential for both irrigators and the wider community.

This scheme prompted a full range of responses, from unequivocal support to implacable opposition. But in our opinion the bulk of public opinion was in favour of its proceeding, with certain provisos. Our community could see the economic benefits that would **ensure** but at the same time were keen to ensure that environmental values were protected.

Such schemes are always going to attract both supporters and detractors and it needs dedication and determination to embark on the lengthy and complex procedures that are needed if a dream is to turn into reality. So, we would like to congratulate the Waihao Downs Irrigation Ltd for their interest and perseverance with their application to take water from the Waitaki River.

The fact that the project has reached this stage in the planning process is a testament to the strong conviction in our farming community in the importance of this scheme to the future prosperity of the whole District. In particular, the contribution of the scheme's first chairman, Martin Mehrtens should be acknowledged. Mr Mehrtens, who lived in this district his whole life, was a man of vision, and sadly passed away just a few weeks ago.

As you will be aware, their original application was submitted to Environment Canterbury before the Minister for the Environment called-in all applications back in December 2003. We feel sure that the application would not now be at this stage if the applicants were not of one mind that the project was one worthy of success.

Nearly 18 months earlier in 2001, the Waimate District Council had contributed \$20,000 towards a feasibility study for Waihao Downs Irrigation Scheme, an indication of the Council's longstanding belief in the scheme's worth.

Why is it that the scheme's supporters such as dozens of farmers, stalwart individuals like Mr Mehrtens and the Council itself are so enthusiastic about it?

A key reason is because of the unique qualities of the land that stands to benefit from the availability of a reliable source of water. Many experienced local farmers believe Waihao Downs has the best wheat-growing soil in New Zealand and could be as productive as land of similar rolling hills in others areas. It is an area with fertile soils, easy topography and superb moisture retention.

However, for this land to achieve its potential, it is crucial that farmers have access to a regular supply of water.

The past few months provide some insight into why the Waihao Downs struggles to achieve its potential. Many dry-land farms in the Waimate District have just experienced a very dry autumn and winter. This has lead to destocking and to subsequent concerns about the impact of the costs of feeding out on their financial viability. This is something I, as a farmer can empathise with. I am sure at least some of those here today can do so as well.

It is not sufficient to have all these natural advantages if the affects of our harsh dryland climate, which in turn leads to pasture and soil degradation, cannot be reversed.

Imagine, the scenario however should Waihao Downs farmers have had access to irrigation in late summer and early autumn. Destocking could have been avoided as would the prospect of an unsure spring. Water insecurity makes it extremely difficult for farmers to contemplate expansion and increased productivity.

The provision of reliable water supplies for agriculture has a wide-reaching impact on the whole of the District.

As a council we wish to see all of our residents benefit from economic growth and as a rural community we know that our economic well-being is intrinsically linked with a thriving agricultural sector.

Already, due to the impact of an increase in dairying (made possible by existing irrigation schemes), we have seen a rise in employment in the area, with more opportunities especially for our young people. For the first time in 20 years, Statistics New Zealand has reported that our population is increasing. More jobs means fewer reasons for our youngsters to move out of the District in search of opportunities and more reasons for young families to move in.

The new Studholme dairy factory has certainly contributed to this change in our economic and social fortunes but we are also well aware that we need to ensure the supply of irrigation water in the future if industries such as this are to stay viable and hopefully expand.

As a council, we would be naïve if we could not envisage the flow-on effects to our operation from a more prosperous region. Rates from irrigators are important for our sustainability and overall greater prosperity will enable us to further develop our community's infrastructure. This means everyone benefits in terms of better quality of life and opportunities.

The Council is of course, well aware that water is a precious resource and needs to be used wisely. The importance of a healthy Waitaki River is not in dispute but we do believe it is possible to find a balance between environmental sustainability, potential hydroelectricity needs and the demands of agricultural producers.

Although clearly our mandate covers the effective and sustainable use of water in our district, I believe the Council is also conversant with the ways in which its stance fits into the "bigger picture"

For the past 4 years I, in my role of mayor, have been involved in the Canterbury Strategic Water Study which has enabled me to gain an insight into the importance of water in terms of its quality uses and storage throughout Canterbury. Partly as a result of this involvement I certainly now appreciate the need for the whole region to work together to identify opportunities and solve problems. The Council as a whole appreciates the need to work together on wider issues such as water use.

The Waimate District Council also has some very specific matters relating to this scheme and the overall management of the river that it wishes to have noted.

- 1) There needs to be 100 per cent reliability for existing irrigators below the Waitaki Dam and 95 per cent reliability for future allocations. It is clear to us that the Waihao Downs application can only proceed if there is reliable water available. This means that the percentage of time which water is likely to be available needs to be within acceptable limits to those parties irrigating or proposing to irrigate.

- 2) Current and future community use of domestic and stock requirements must be provided for.
- 3) The water takes and rights held by the Waimate District Council for public water schemes must be protected
- 4) Adequate recognition must be given to the rights of other water extractors.

In Conclusion

I wish to emphasise once more that the future growth and prosperity of our district depends hugely on present and future water supplies that can be secured by projects such as Waihao Downs Irrigation. I also need to stress that it is vital that the District's existing community water intakes are protected.

It is not my role, nor within my area of expertise, to answer questions of a technical nature concerning this scheme but I do believe that I speak with authority as representing the collective view of our community.

We trust that our contribution to this application process is of value to you and thank you for the opportunity to present our evidence.

John Coles
Mayor of Waimate