

# A flash in a watery pan? A comment on the Canterbury Water Management Strategy

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There have been a lot of knives out for Environment Canterbury (ECan) of late. Indeed, it is hard to believe that ECan and the Mayors in the Canterbury region could possibly work together for the benefit of Canterbury given some of the recent events. But, somewhat behind the scenes, there have been some very positive joint projects. It is to be hoped that these will not suffer serious setbacks as individual political agenda, genuinely held or otherwise, come to the fore.

Among the most genuine advances has been the Canterbury Water Management Strategy (CWMS), driven by the Canterbury Mayoral Forum, which included the then chair of the regional council and the Mayors of the Territorial Local Authorities. The Strategy sets out a programme for creating 'new' water through management practices that improve the efficiency of water use and develop new storage and (re-)distribution infrastructure while proactively restoring degraded water ecosystems, quality and quantity. This will come at a price and will require all players to stay the course. The Canterbury community may play a key role in ensuring there is no backsliding for short term political goals.

It will surprise those in other regions if Canterbury can pull this off. For many years, people in more watery northern parts of the country have looked askance at Canterbury. This is a rainshadow region, largely dependent on water-intensive agriculture which potentially threatens the lifeblood of the nation's second largest city. Surely it would be among the first to develop a rational means of husbanding its precious water, its most valuable resource?

For those outside Canterbury, the failure to develop regional water plans in the early 1990s suggested a regional council with no grip on reality, a region that had no sense of the vulnerability of its economic, social and cultural well-being. This failure was often blamed on farmer domination of the regional council. It was not helped by the council's approach to planning. By attempting a fully integrated regional plan, the urgent needs of particular vulnerable, critically important resources were overlooked. The resultant glacial pace of the passage of the Proposed Natural Regional Resources Plan (PNRRP) left the region open to the ravages of first-in, first-served grabs for water. Individual water catchment plans were not developed and court battles became the norm. The Strategy seeks to rectify this failure.

This is not to suggest that those who sought, and still seek, rights to take or pollute water are bad people. They are making individually-rational, financial decisions in the absence of community-rational mechanisms to allocate water. Community-rational mechanisms ostensibly address the imperfections of short term market places and the complexities of environmental systems.

Canterbury's water reality is one of complex, multiple overlapping systems. The aquifers that provide water for lowland streams, the city and irrigation schemes, lie in easy-to-access, but difficult to assess, layers of soil and stone. At some levels the water moves more freely than through others. Pollutants from the surface leach through to the groundwater. Layers of less

permeable soils create barriers slowing the vertical movements of water. This creates a nesting of aquifer above aquifer. The less permeable layers are punctured by drills for domestic and commercial water. It is difficult to assess the extent to which water trickles downwards, or is pushed upwards by changes in water pressure, as a result of the removal of upper levels of water, or the punctures. This creates real problems for those making decisions on case by case applications for water.

Scientists can not yet, if ever, provide unambiguous solutions for decision-makers. Such problems have led to calls for a precautionary approach to water management through national water policies. The Government has yet to deliver such policies and they would need to be implemented through Resource Management Act (RMA) plans. Instead, the RMA provides litigious and adversarial fora for allocating rights to water. The worst excesses of this approach can be avoided through regional water plans. The lack of such plans has brought the RMA into undeserved disrepute.

The Canterbury Water Management Strategy could have been developed through the RMA processes and it will ultimately rely on the RMA and provisions of the Local Government Act to be delivered. The latter mechanisms are as politically vulnerable as are those of the RMA. The Strategy provides a mechanism that transcends and should survive the vagaries of such specific legislation.

The Canterbury Water Management Strategy is an example of collaborative commitment and of the Cantabrians involved working as a community. It bridges the artificial barrier that is sometimes constructed between the interests of urban and rural people. It is not perfect. It will take time to come to fruition, and it will depend on support from the community, funding from central government, and be underpinned by the Natural Regional Resources Plan (NRRP), but it is the only vehicle moving in the direction of a better integrated water future for all. It deserves recognition and support from the community and the Mayoral Forum should be congratulated for the initiative.

However, even while it was being finalised, the Mayors of the Territorial Local Authorities in the region co-authored and signed a letter to the Minister of Local Government which included calling the regional council "dysfunctional". If the territorial authorities cannot work with the regional council, then how can others in the community, and how can the CWMS be expected to deliver for the Canterbury region? The very existence of Canterbury as a region or a concept is now in question, and the future may see competing unitary authorities trying to work together to manage shared water resources. The situation is ripe for a bad water future for all.

The Strategy and the collaborative effort that has gone into its development need to be demonstrably more than just another fleeting, flash in the pan. Otherwise, the funding that might have helped solve our water problems may well be diverted into less productive administrative restructuring and court battles.