

CASE STUDY: OPUHA WATER

New management era emerges

As water and irrigation companies look to the future some fundamental changes are taking place. Annette Scott looks at a new era of management for Opuha Water Ltd.

The creation of new roles within irrigation company management structures point to a new era of professionalism as the industry steps up to meet the demands of growing complexities in water resource management.

Traditionally farmer-irrigators who championed development of community schemes took on the leadership roles and managed the various tasks involved. While still ultimately irrigator-driven, these companies are now employing specialist professionals to tackle the increasing intensity of the challenges that are emerging with effective water management – Opuha is an example of this ‘new era’ management.

The primary purpose of the Opuha dam is to capture and store water from the upstream catchments and then control the release of this water to maintain environmentally sustainable flows in the downstream rivers and enable abstraction for irrigation of approximately 16,000ha by over 200 landowners, and for domestic water supply.

The dam is a reasonably recent infrastructure project undertaken by the community of South Canterbury. The project provides water for irrigation, but also provides commercial and domestic water for the Timaru District Council, and generates electricity. Most importantly, it prioritises water storage for release into the Opuha River and into the Opihi River to supplement the flows in the river in times of drought and/or low natural flows.

Initially, the concept came out of discussions between Electricity New Zealand and the Opihi Augmentation Society, but resulted in the Opuha Dam Partnership being formed in 1992 to commercialise the project. At this time, it enjoyed the support of local lines company, Alpine Energy Ltd, Timaru District Council, Opihi River Development Company and two irrigation companies, South Canterbury Farmers Irrigation Society Ltd and Levels Plain Irrigation Company Ltd.

Over the years ownership has changed to the point where the current owner is Opuha Water Limited (OPL) with the farmers now holding direct shareholding in the company itself. The project has been immensely successful for all involved.

In March this year Tony McCormick was appointed as chief executive. With a BE (mechanical), a MBA in technology management and a previous career that includes 25 years in electricity generation and development, and more recently four years with Fulton Hogan in a business development role, he heads a new level of management.

The creation of additional roles within the company, include William Scott, operations and raceman, and Christine Gardener as office manager. Chris Emmerson, operations and raceman is “old blood with excellent knowledge” in the new team. Meanwhile, the company in line with its new management level is currently interviewing for an operations and asset manager to join the team as it brings more of its current business activities in-house.

McCormick acknowledged the “enormous effort” that has been put in by so many people in successfully getting the Opuha operation to where it is today. While Opuha may be described as a moderate sized business, it was the commercial activity that depended on, and is enabled by the reliable delivery of water, that is so hugely significant in the region.

“I am also mindful of the wider responsibilities especially in regard to environmental management that comes with this role. We need to be looking ahead at where we need to take our business in light of the changing and evolving regulatory environment in which we operate.”