

# Options must be explored

By Tom Belford

The Hawke's Bay Regional Council needs a Plan B. A comprehensive plan of action to replace its singular — and all-consuming — focus on building a mega-dam at the top of the Tukituki.

The dam has been presented as a silver bullet for increasing farm productivity in Central Hawke's Bay while simultaneously improving the environmental condition of the Tukituki River system, despite massive projected farming intensification.

Both outcomes are doubtful.

And whether one accepts that reality or not, the dam twists in the wind, its germination costing



Tom Belford

\$250,000+ a month, since sufficient farmer/irrigators are yet to endorse the project with their cheque books.

Nevertheless, HBRC has refused, to date, to consider or present proven alternatives that might better enable CHB farmers (to say nothing of other farmers in Hawke's Bay) to optimise the value of their productive land in dry conditions, to improve soil health and mitigate erosion (especially in hill country), and to better capture and store the rainwater that is available.

Moreover, other cutting edge farmers and farm consultants are demonstrating how sharply reduced fertiliser use (and therefore markedly reduced nutrient leaching) and improved farm productivity and profitability can co-exist.

Although approaches to accomplish each of these goals are being proven today in various parts of New Zealand, HBRC has shown zero interest in those approaches or their practitioners.

A miserable failure of leadership. Five members of our regional council — you can guess who they are — have twice voted down my resolutions merely proposing a Hawke's Bay forum to explore these approaches and showcase their advocates.

Advocates like sheep farmer Doug Avery — from drier-than-Hawke's-Bay-Marlborough — and Lincoln University dryland farming expert Derrick Moot, who have shown conclusively that smart growing practices can yield twice the return to farmers as irrigation. Indeed, Avery thinks of himself as farming water, not farming sheep. Farmers like Avery are making 25 per cent rates of return or better with their dryland systems. Did you hear that CHB farmers?!

The current *Listener* magazine profiles the accomplishments of these two (and others). And the farm trade press regularly covers them. Farm consultant Graeme Ogle, who has studied systems like Avery's around New Zealand, says of Avery: "I think Doug Avery single-handedly has probably brought about the biggest change in farming practice in New Zealand." Ogle adds: "It's always an option not to irrigate. And the best option is to drought-proof your farm." Did you hear that CHB farmers?!

But as I said, don't expect the regional council to take note of the alternatives to irrigation promoted by these achievers. The accomplishments of Avery and his successful band challenge the case for the Ruataniwha dam.

So, some of us are not waiting any longer for HBRC leadership, at either the political or staff level... although we hope they will follow.

A working party consisting of

experienced farmers, soil experts, farm advisers and farm economists is now taking shape. This 'hands-on' group aims to showcase farming practices that can sustainably improve farm productivity here in Hawke's Bay. And to do so not on some theoretical basis, but by helping design practical farm plans, farm by farm, and demonstration projects that can achieve the simultaneous goals of increasing profitability and improving the environment.

The first focus of the group will be on Central Hawke's Bay, because farmers there have been promised much that the dam will simply not deliver. They deserve a Plan B.

That said, the methods and strategy involved will have applicability and relevance throughout Hawke's Bay and, hopefully, farmers throughout the region will want to become informed and involved. But all of this will require financial assistance.

This is the kind of initiative that HBRC should welcome and support. But unfortunately, when it comes to helping farmers raise the bar, HBRC's ruling group is either remarkably unmotivated, or utterly clueless about successful 'multiple bottom line' practices.

A real pity, as some work generated by the \$20 million dollars (and rising) spent on preparing for the dam (eg, detailed soil mapping) could be salvaged and used constructively in a Plan B initiative.

Similarly, the requirement now set by Plan Change 6 for 1000+ farmers in CHB to prepare Farm Environmental Management Plans (FEMPs) could be much better conceived and better supported to produce Adaptive Farming Plans.

The working party is now organising itself, expanding participation, and refining its plan of action. Stay tuned!

■ Tom Belford is a Hawke's Bay Regional councillor