

Dam tipped to change lives and livelihoods

SUE NEALES
RURAL REPORTER

AMY Grubb and Alan Coulson are the eager faces of the new-look rural Tasmania.

A Tasmania built not on clearfelled trees, divisive logging and a class-ridden pastoral past, but a more hi-tech future based around gourmet, specialist and high-value irrigated foods.

That future came a step closer this week when water began filling the biggest dam yet built by the state-owned Tasmanian Irrigation company on the fast-flowing South Esk River near Campbell Town in Tasmania's wool-growing heart.

The \$12 million Milford Dam will supply 5300 megalitres of irrigation water annually to farmland downstream, stimulating cropping, horticultural and dairy ventures along the glorious river and sheep valley so beloved by colonial painter John Glover.

But for Mr Coulson, who has overseen the dam's construction, and farmer Ms Grubb, the new world of Tasmanian agriculture is also deeply personal; its fresh face closely mirrored in their own lives.

Until two years ago, Mr Coulson, now an irrigation project officer, was a forester logging trees for Tasmania's once-omnipresent, but now almost defunct, Gunns timber company.

Ms Grubb lives with her husband Ben and two young boys on the South Esk River south of Launceston, on Fernhill, home to



Amy Grubb, son Beau and dog Shorn among the carrots

of Australia's oldest merino sheep flocks.

But both now are pinning their hopes, their livelihoods and their futures — and for Ms Grubb those of her sons as well — on the success of the rural transformation promised by the \$300 million expansion of Tasmania's irrigation network.

The irony that Tasmania's future is now pinned to new dams and water — after the bitter “No Dams” confrontations on the Franklin River in the early 1980s that changed Tasmania's and Australia's political and environmental history — is not lost on Mr Coulson and Ms Grubb.

“My background is in forestry — I'm ex-Gunns — so to be involved in a project like this where I can take a site from being a paddock to a dam in a year that will

add so much value and so many jobs to the local economy, is very satisfying,” Mr Coulson said.

“The farmers and local community are right behind it; a lot of them are doing some dryland poppy growing as well as sheep... but secure irrigation water makes it all much more profitable.”

The Lower South Esk irrigation scheme based on the Milford Dam is one of 10 irrigation projects, linked to a grid of rivers, dams and pipelines, now either completed or in construction across Tasmania.

Costing more than \$310m, they have been built with \$220m of state and federal funding.

Five further schemes costing a further \$130m of taxpayers' funds are on the drawing board for a 2014 start. Standing in a green field of neatly rowed carrots, Ms Grubb admits the idea of growing crops,



PICTURES: CHRIS CRERAR

Amy Grubb and Alan Coulson in the now filling Milford Dam

particularly vegetables, was something never on the radar for generations of Fernhill stud sheep breeders and woolgrowers.

But the young Grubbs have just invested \$117,000 buying 100 megalitres of water rights from the new dam for their 800ha river-front farm — and fully expect cropping to replace sheep at Fernhill during the next few years.

“This dam makes a huge difference for us; it changes our thinking entirely about what sort of farmers we are now and what we can be in the future,” Ms Grubb said.

“But the idea of irrigated cropping does scare the pants off some farmers around here who have always just had sheep; you have to skill up and get used to the fact this is high input-cost, high-risk farming — but the reward can be very lucrative.”

Ms Grubb said finding the spare cash to buy even 100 megalitres of water rights was difficult; even though \$1170 for each megalitre entitlement would be considered cheap on the mainland.

Ms Grubb said plunging into the unknown was daunting but exciting. “We really couldn't afford to buy the water but when this dam was proposed, you know as a farmer it is a one-shot opportunity; that we couldn't afford not to put our hand up,” Ms Grubb said as her two-year-old son Beau played among the carrot rows.

“To get irrigation water of this security is to have a chance to be one of the people whose life is changed by irrigation; we had to do that for our families... and for the people who work here because you can't make money out of sheep and wool any more.”