



Dry summer no sweat for farmers with irrigation

Farmers know that markets and the weather go in cycles. Last summer was drier than usual. Farmers who invested in new irrigation schemes were able to rely on them in 2012-13 to maintain production or even boost returns from new crops.



Tasmanian Irrigation (TI) schemes have progressively come on line since 2010 starting with the Sassafra Wesley Vale and Whitmore schemes. These were followed by the Great Forester scheme for the 2011-12 season and the expanded Winnaleah scheme in time for the summer just ended.

The first two of these summers were wet. Farmers had no need to rely on the schemes to finish crops. Consequently, demand on the schemes was light in those years.

Not so for 2012-13. Parts of Tasmania recorded record high temperatures and rain was so scarce that some districts were approaching record low rainfalls.

As the summer progressed, restrictions on taking water from rivers and streams were introduced and tightened. However, farmers who had secured irrigation rights to Tasmanian Irrigation schemes were able to fall back on these to sustain their production.

"The schemes really came into their own this growing season," said TI's General Manager of Operations, Mike O'Shea.

"Demand kicked in very strongly from early December and was sustained for quite a while at a level which exceeded the peak in previous years."



Meander Valley.

More farmers will benefit from reliable water supply this year when the fifth and sixth of the new irrigation schemes become ready ahead of the coming 2013-14 season. These are at Kindred North Motton in the central northwest and the Lower South Esk schemes which will provide additional irrigation water to the northern midlands above Conara.

These will be followed by the largest of the new irrigation developments, the Midlands Water Scheme which will bring additional irrigation to the central and southern midlands from about Campbell Town to further south than Kempton.

Midlands Water Scheme Project Manager Sven Meyer said that the project remained on schedule and construction may even be essentially complete by early 2014. If so, the commissioning period might allow some water from the scheme to be delivered towards the end of the 2013-14 season.

A further two projects – one in the Upper Ringarooma district and the other southeast of Hobart – will complete the first tranche of irrigation development.

Mike said that demand across all the schemes operated by Tasmanian Irrigation had stabilised at about 1,000 ML a week by mid-season.

This volume can be appreciated by considering that by definition one megalitre (ML) of water covers one hectare to a depth of 10 cms.

"It makes you appreciate the importance of irrigation to underpinning considerable agriculture production in Tasmania in drier years."

With food security and irrigation featuring in national debate, there has been significant interest Australia-wide in the irrigation development underway in Tasmania.

'Irrigation to add billions to agriculture in Tasmania' was the conclusion of the ABC national current affairs radio program AM. It highlighted how Hydro Tasmania water is being used by many of the new schemes to grow high value crops in regions which had lacked sufficient water:

The program featured chairman of the Whitemore Irrigator Representative Group, Robert Dent, who amongst other developments has converted a dry land paddock into a crop of irrigated potatoes. "We know that we can put in a crop like this and that we can water it all through," Robert said.

"We're going to be using something like five ML of water to the hectare here, and so you've got to make sure that you've got it.

"There's a lot of money tied up in potatoes. There's about 30 odd hectares here and if we didn't have the water and the crop ran out of steam towards the end, then that's a lot of



money that could have gone down the drain."

Midlands Water Scheme champion Richard Gardner attracted interest because he has commenced establishing a dairy herd on his Tunbridge farm which, like much of the midlands, has been grazing country for 150 years.

"There's a lot of opportunity for dairy in Tasmania. The industry is looking to expand as much as possible to fill the processing capacity," Richard said.

"I think Tasmania along with New Zealand is one of the best places in the world to produce milk. It's going to be something different in this part of the world but I think there is great opportunity here."

In the northwest, some farmers in the Sassafras Wesley Vale area say that their scheme has shifted the paradigm of their farming operations. "I don't look at the forecast anymore," said Sassafras Wesley Vale irrigator chair Stuart Greenhill.

"I now know how much water I can pretty well rely on. For a farmer, that's a lovely position to be in." Work is only going to get busier for Mike O'Shea and TI scheme managers. The next three schemes coming on-line will have



the capacity to provide an additional 46,300 ML a year at 95 per cent reliability.

TI schemes are built as public-private partnerships. The public component to construction costs is provided by the Commonwealth Government through its Water for the Future program and the Tasmanian Government through its Water Infrastructure Fund.

Private capital is raised through the sale of water entitlements to schemes. There is no public subsidy for scheme operational costs which are funded through annual charges on the holders of water entitlements.

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