

IrrigationNZ Honorary Member

Honorary membership recognizes outstanding service and the significant contribution of time and knowledge to Irrigation New Zealand. This year the recipient of the token member who received recognition was Canterbury man John Donkers. We caught up with him to hear about his involvement with irrigation and IrrigationNZ.



John Donkers speaks at the 2020 AGM after recognition of becoming an Honorary Member

When did you first get involved with irrigation and IrrigationNZ?

Current role – irrigated dairy farmer and dairy farm consultant.

As a farmer and a dairy farm consultant for over 25 years and with IrrigationNZ since 2003. I first became involved with irrigation in 1989 when I was a farm supervisor for corporate dairy farmer Applefields Dairy Co. Ltd. We established our own dairy farming operation in 1994 near Dunsandel and in 1997 expanded, buying a farm at Te Pirita where we drilled for water and ultimately developed several farms. At that time there was significant new development of irrigation from groundwater in the area and there were significant questions being raised about the reliability of the groundwater supply. This led to a group of us establishing the Dunsandel Groundwater Users Assoc. The DGUA assisted in funding science and modelling work to better understand groundwater systems on the Central Plains. The organisation also assisted members when ECAN undertook a review of groundwater consents in the Selwyn-Rakaia groundwater zone in the early 2000s.

In 1999 a joint Selwyn District Council-Christchurch City Council project to establish a steering committee to investigate the opportunities for the development of water resources for the Central Canterbury Plains called for expressions of interest. I put my name forward and became involved in what has grown to become the Central Plains Water Scheme. Today CPWL irrigates approx. 44,000ha of the Central Plains with many irrigators switching from groundwater to the CPWL surface supply.

These interests fueled my interest in the reformation of the NZ Irrigation Association in the 1999-2000. Consultants and some farmers held several meetings in Ashburton that culminated in the relaunch of the Association in 2001, with Bob Engelbrecht as Chairman..

I joined the Board in 2003 when the organization had perhaps 100 members and a very small budget. It was not until Terry Heiler agreed to take the role of part time CEO in 2005 that the organisation gained some traction with the majority of the large irrigation schemes agreeing to pay annual memberships. Graeme Sutton had taken over as chairmanship with the aim of making the organization more farmer/irrigator led.

A memorable step in this direction was a bus tour of irrigation schemes in Australia organized by Terry. The discussions and negotiations on this trip laid the foundation for the current structure of INZ.

What is it that interests you about water management?

Irrigation and water management is very exciting and has transformed rural communities that were once prone to drought and struggling economically.

There has always been a challenge of using water more efficiently and INZ played a big role in leading improvement in system design, installation, and management.

Prior to INZ reforming the irrigation sector was very fragmented. A scheme on one bank of the river might have a problem that a scheme on the opposite bank had under control. INZ was pivotal in bringing irrigators and schemes together to share problems, ideas, and solutions; and it continues to do this today.

What has been the most important thing you have learnt about irrigation?

Irrigation is so much more than putting water on land, I like to think of it as water for communities. It goes beyond the farm and has major social and economic influence. The challenge today is to operate in a way that is socially and environmentally responsible yet enables farmers to be economically viable.

Where do you see the future of water management and irrigation going?

In the future I see the sector continuing to grow with more and more focus on technology – to not only improve water use efficiency but to further reduce the environmental footprint of irrigation. Unfortunately, irrigation has been linked to dairy farming when it is not just about that at all, irrigation is about choices for farmers. In future the choice may be away from irrigating dairy pasture to more lucrative agricultural or horticultural crops. Without irrigation there would not be this choice.

We cannot say today what the future of irrigated agriculture will be. By way of example, I was at Lincoln University when the Amuri Irrigation Scheme was being built in the late 1970's early 80's. -. Land use was mainly sheep and some cropping, which was intensified under irrigation. Who would have predicted then that the Amuri Basin would be virtually wall to wall dairy farming 30 years later?

We cannot say with certainty what the future of agriculture will be, but we can say that irrigators will have many more options than if they farmed without water.