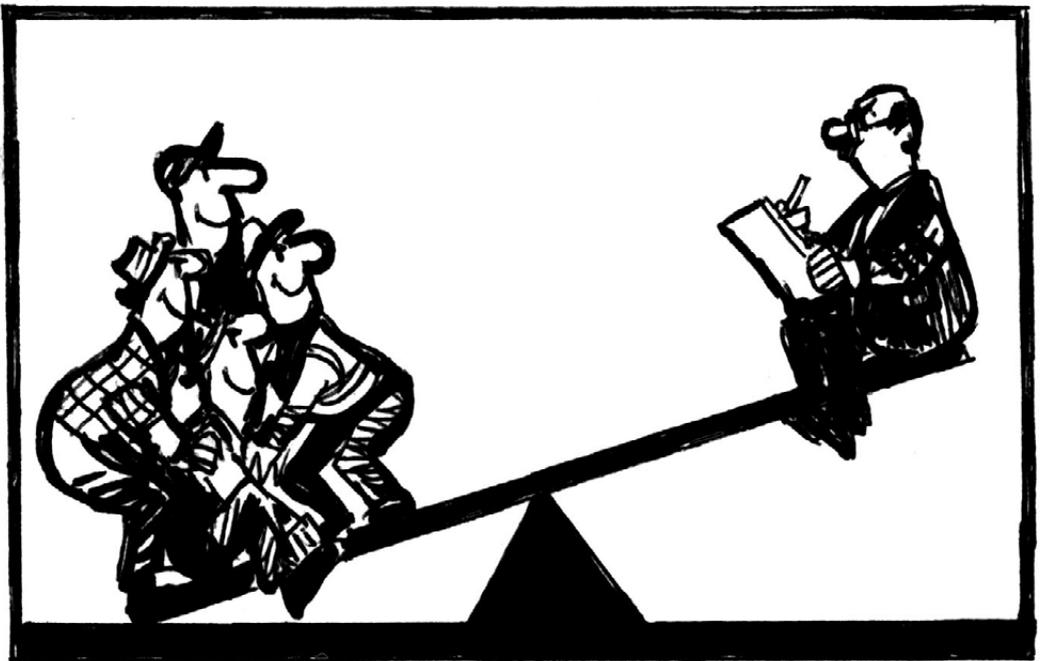


# Irrigator User Group: 'How to' Guide





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Ministry for Primary Industries  
Manatū Ahu Matua



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# Opening comments

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*As a founding member of the Ellesmere Irrigation Society Incorporated, a 120 member water user group in Canterbury, and having 18 years as a practicing environmental planner, I cannot stress enough the importance of individual irrigators coming together and creating a 'joint force' in dealing with the various authorities/organisations and creating a working relationship with them. One of the key tips from this booklet is the necessity to form a group early and start building working relationships with key stakeholders. Done well this will hold you in good stead for the future and get you involved with regulation development early on rather than trying to combat it later when the regulations developed do not 'marry up' with how you operate on the ground.*

*Central to the set-up of any group is ensuring you have the right people in the right roles. It is surprising how resourceful communities can be and more often than not positions can be easily filled with highly experienced, knowledgeable, astute and enthusiastic people who can easily be supported by a simple yet robust administration system. These groups lead to stronger community connections and provide support for individuals who do not feel confident in dealing with the complex nature of water use and its regulation. A significant key benefit is that major financial costs can be drastically reduced to the individual through user group membership.*

*I highly recommend the tips and information in this guide as a great way to get started on setting up a water user group in your area and utilising Irrigation New Zealand's skills to help you along the way.*

Carey Barnett  
Secretary and Environmental Resource Management Planner for  
the Ellesmere Irrigation Society Inc.

# What can an irrigator user group achieve?

The question is always asked “Why do we need a user group?” There are several reasons:

1. **Strength in numbers**
2. **Benefits at an individual and group level**
3. **Area-specific co-ordinated and consistent approach to resource management**
4. **Gives confidence to the wider community that the resource is being managed responsibly.**

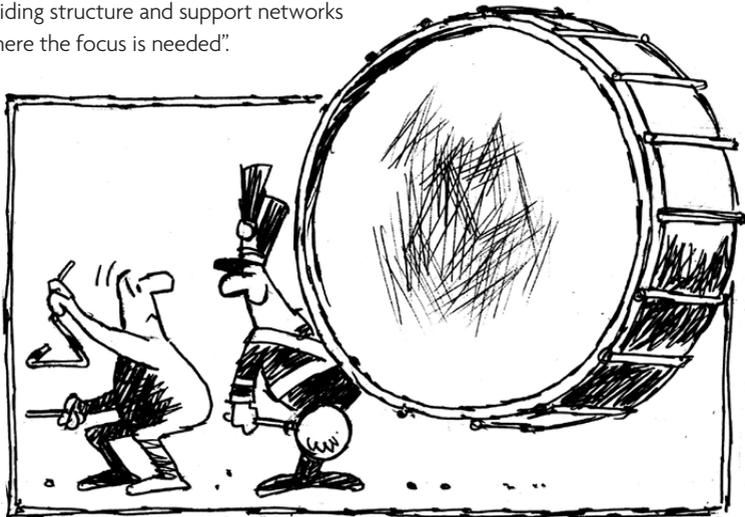
Sometimes the ‘why’ is not immediately obvious but one thing is certain:

*“If you don’t have anything to join, no-one will join.”*

The statement might seem blindingly obvious but it underpins the reason to have a group. The reasons for forming a group and motivation for joining may differ but the need for collective action remains.

There are many examples of successful groups which this guide was able to learn from, but there is no resource aimed at enabling new irrigator user groups to get underway. This ‘How to’ guide addresses that gap.

Existing groups have proven “once the first challenge is overcome... groups grow legs and self-manage – ‘getting them started’ by providing structure and support networks is where the focus is needed”.



# What is the catalyst?

Often the decision to begin a group is in response to some form of pressure to irrigators in the area. The catalyst to form groups can be summarised into three main headings.

1. Resource pressure
2. Consent/plan review
3. Financial

## 1. Resource pressure

The National Policy Statement on Freshwater Management released in May 2011 contains a directive to require all regional councils to set “enforceable quality and quantity limits”. The water quality aspect of land use intensification is now the most pressing impact upon irrigation that needs to be considered. Water quantity limits and allocation methods are familiar but water quality, in most regions, has not been considered to the same extent. The national directive now puts quality on the same footing as quantity.

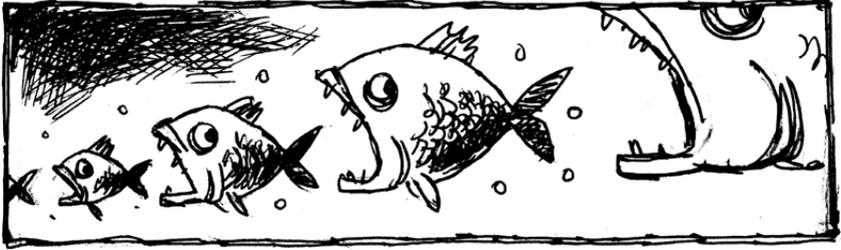
The two most common forms of water quantity pressure are either an increase in demand where there is a limited resource or a drought event.

### ASHBURTON – CATALYST

The Ashburton river user group was developed out of a desire to manage water more effectively from the Ashburton River. In times of low flows there was seen to be lost opportunities around the availability of water after periods of restrictions. After a rainfall event, if the river had risen above the restriction cut-off level, the irrigators could see physically and via the council website there were increased flows but they could not access it. This was because officially the restrictions had not been lifted. The time lag to lifting of restrictions meant the window to access the increased flows was limiting and in some instances missed altogether as the river naturally drained away.

It was also noticed that individuals and schemes with larger takes were displaying individualistic behaviour and the trigger points leading to the low flow restrictions were not being managed progressively. This behaviour meant that the river was being “bounced” on and off restrictions. This created extra workload for the irrigators.

The combination of lost opportunity and a desire for more efficient river management was the catalyst to form the group.



The quality pressure manifests itself as an effect of irrigation. It could be nutrient, temperature or habitat related. Abstraction or alternately an increase in discharges to a waterway or wetland area can cause quality changes.

## 2. Consent/Plan review

Plan reviews are a common formation catalyst. Every regional and catchment plan has a regular review period where the plans are scrutinised and considered to see if they are meeting regulatory and community expectations.

Individuals are able to participate in review processes but often they are competing with other interests that are highly organised and resourced. Regional councils do their best to include individual consent holders but too often there is a lack of engagement.

To individual farmers the statutory plan processes are difficult to understand. Time constraints and having to digest technical, legal material can result in compromise. A user group is able to develop or source resources to cover these concerns. If engagement is left until the review process is well down the track then it can become an expensive legal process.

### OPUHA – RESOURCE PRESSURE

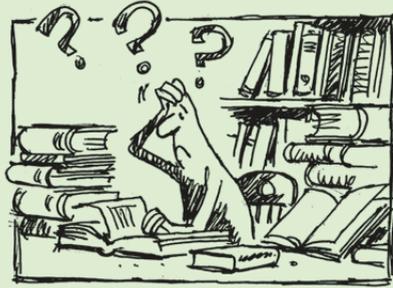
The Opuha irrigation scheme in the South Canterbury supplies water to the environment as its first priority. This is driven by the quantity aspect but it also directly helps with water quality in the Opihi River.

### ELLESMERE – CONSENT REVIEW

*“If we had been organised earlier... would have been cheaper and easier when dealing with the plan review.”* Getting involved at the formulation stage not the submission stage will always produce a more favourable outcome.

## ORARI – STEERING AND TECHNICAL GROUP

As part of the Orari Water User group's involvement in the Orari River plan review a steering group was set up involving representatives from all catchment stakeholders. The steering group was able to have open discussion and debate with the regional council planner in the room. The group employed a consultant so the process and documents were able to be 'translated'.



It was soon realised that often information was technically difficult to comprehend. Some members already had a good understanding but those not familiar with the subject matter found themselves at a disadvantage. The Orari group formed a working group to deal with detailed technical reports. Expertise was engaged that could successfully negotiate with a greater level of understanding whilst being guided by 'Orari Water' principles and positions.

## 3. Financial

Nothing focuses the mind more than a financial threat or shock when in business. When it involves a key input such as irrigation it can be a strong incentive to get involved to safeguard investment.

The opportunity to pool resources and create buying power or optimisation of infrastructure, telemetry equipment for example, is often the catalyst for some to implement collective action.

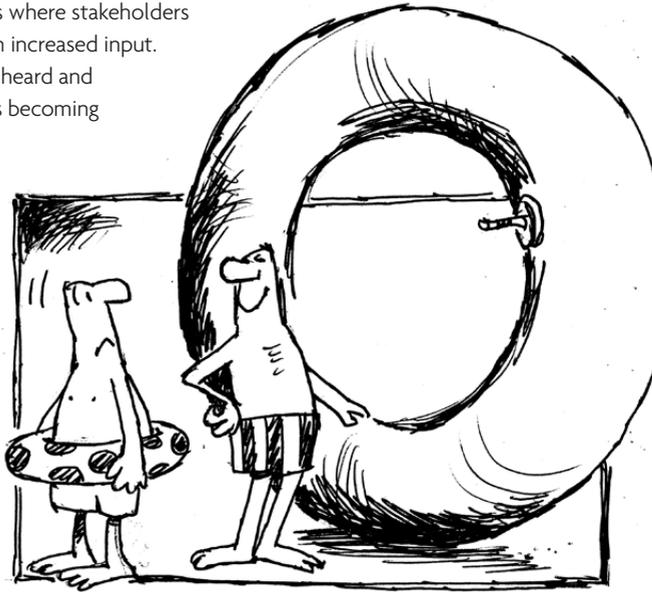
*Whatever the catalyst, the challenge for irrigators is the timely establishment of user groups. This way they can work proactively instead of playing catch up and being reactive. With groups in existence managing pressures and challenges is easier and opportunities can be taken.*

# Who are the individuals?

The target audience for this 'How to' guide is existing and potential irrigators that have previously dealt with regulatory bodies and service industries individually. Consents holders operating in the same area, or abstracting from the same water source or catchment have no immediate infrastructure or scheme governance to bind them together.

Future resource management in New Zealand is moving towards collaborative processes where stakeholders from all parts of society have an increased input. The ability of lone voices to be heard and considered in these processes is becoming increasingly difficult.

This guide is quite specific in targeting individual consent holders with the purpose of forming irrigator user groups, but the principles and processes can equally be applied to other land based groups with a common purpose.



# What are we creating?

## Definition of irrigation user group

'A group of consent holders that choose to work together to face common opportunities or challenges. The group relates to an area, catchment, community or zone.'

This definition describes a typical irrigator user group. But it does not cover the range of groups that already exist. Groups once formed can morph. An irrigator user group does not need to be restricted to irrigators. There are many groups whose members include water associated individuals, businesses and regulatory authorities and some user groups cross industry sectors.

### FRANKLIN – MEMBERSHIP

The Franklin group covers a wide and varied area from the outskirts of Auckland into the Waikato River catchment.

Membership spans the range of productive uses. Vegetable, horticulture, glasshouse and dairy are the predominant sectors with representation from each.

The group has very good representation from councils with two long term employees and elected members acting as the main conduit. Committee members have affiliations to other industry organisations such as Federated Famers, Pukekohe vegetable growers and Horticulture NZ covering the wide variety of interests.

## Where do irrigator user groups fit?

### RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Within the irrigation industry from the individual irrigator to the macro management level there are many examples of 'management' groups. Figure 1 demonstrates the changing nature of the role and definition of groups as they progress out from the individual consent holder.

At one end of the spectrum are the individual irrigators operating alone without any coordination and at the other end there are the processes like the national level 'Land and Water Forum' that can influence everything that the individual operator is able to achieve. A group gives irrigators the opportunity to move beyond their individual scope of influence.

User groups are in the middle of the spectrum and with their feet firmly on the ground they are uniquely placed to influence back and forward from this position. Back to aid irrigators to adopt good management practice; and forward to join and be heard in the regional and national deliberations.

## AWATERE – RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The Marlborough District Council uses the Awatere user group meetings and communication networks to discuss related resource issues. An example of this is the extraction of gravel from the riverbed for a large SH1 upgrade. A significant amount of gravel was needed and the group was able to signal that the extraction timing and position would upset the natural path and flow of the river in turn affecting off takes.

Having the group structures to use enabled the council to access local knowledge and better manage the resource. Being in a position of responsibility, the chairman has thought wider than his immediate sphere for the betterment of the community. He had to be aware and be the eyes and ears for the group.

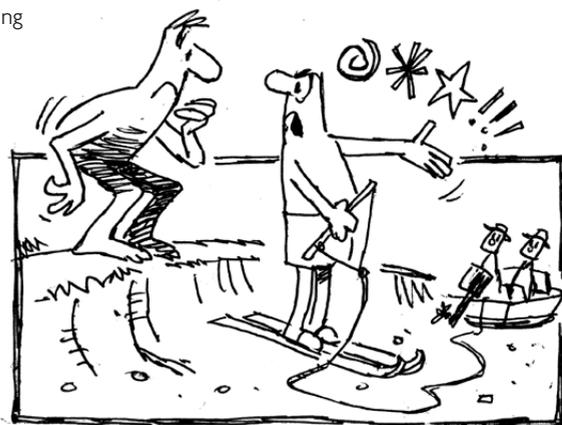
The step up in communications has broadened the scope of influence.

Once the linkages are made and trust is developed the group's influence can expand to associated land and natural resource issues. As the resource management progresses out from the direct resource user the importance of collective action and the impact of that influence increases at a regional and national level. As a representative body they can speak with authority.

## COMMUNITY

Not to be underestimated is the benefit of having a group within the social community of the district. An organised irrigator user group is able to be a focal point for the message coordination and extension of what the irrigators are doing to allay any concerns. As a group they can be proactive, gain strength in numbers and use that vehicle to promote Good Management Practice amongst themselves, improving the industry standard to demonstrate responsible resource use.

Within a group being able to moderate opinions and present a united front is a very effective way of promoting a message.



# How are user groups viewed by regulatory authorities?

To gain an insight into an important other party that groups deal with, a survey of the main regional councils dealing with groups was undertaken. The full text and results of the survey is available on the IrrigationNZ website at [www.irrigationnz.co.nz](http://www.irrigationnz.co.nz).

## Survey summary

For councils there are two dominant reasons to have groups within resource management framework.

### 1. THE EFFICIENCY OF COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Condensing a large number of consent holders or stakeholders into a common voice and contact point and being able to reach them and get them engaged is seen as a huge advantage for councils. However there is competing demands on council resources to enable and facilitate groups. Therefore it is imperative that groups are able and willing to resource themselves to become and stay more visible and relevant to councils.

### 2. THE OPPORTUNITY FOR DIRECT PARTICIPATION IN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Universally the councils see user groups as fundamental to catchment management and are all very open to letting responsibility rest with the direct users of the water resource provided the credibility and auditability functions are covered. The depth and breadth of roles that groups are expected to fulfil underlines the need for structured groups to exist and the gaps that regional councils see within their resource management strategies in dealing with farmers and growers.



For user groups to be effective and useful organisations the two most critical aspects required from a council perspective are a robust, credible governance structure and good working relationships. A governance structure provides auditability and confidence that a group is operating effectively. The relationships aspect covers both the internal and external dealings of a group and allows confidence in the personnel and group as a whole.

# Building a user group

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## The “How to” – It’s easy!

As with any project there are no hard and fast rules, but there are some key steps to get right along the way.

- **Step 1 Leadership**  
Find a champion... and some deputies
- **Step 2 Purpose**  
Decide on a reason to exist. Refine the purpose and clearly identify what the group aims to achieve
- **Step 3 Representation**  
Compile a comprehensive list of all potential members – use local knowledge!
- **Step 4 Structure**  
Decide on a structure. Make it fit for purpose.
- **Step 5 Communication**  
Rally the troops. Personally contact all potential members clearly articulating what you are going to achieve. Identify the tricky customers – tailor your approach.  
Spread the load amongst the deputies.

For irrigator user groups to work there are some key factors, expanding on the themes in the five steps, which need to be right.

# The “How to” – for success

## LEADERSHIP

**Every group must have a champion.**

Theodore Roosevelt said:

*“The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it.”*

Leadership can be the defining factor for the culture, success and effectiveness of groups.



Below are six attributes of importance.

1. **Communication skills**  
The ability to connect with people and develop trust and relationships.
2. **Stand up and be counted**  
Confidence and resilience to stay firm on principles and ideals.
3. **Patient and a reasoned thinker**  
A patient nature and the capacity to think through issues.
4. **Big picture thinker**  
Aptitude to look wider and beyond an immediate problem. .
5. **Well connected**  
Actively maintain a relevant network of contacts.
6. **Organisational skills**  
Capability to effectively chair a group managing different personalities.

## COMMUNICATION

### Effective communication is fundamental to success.

Fronting up, face to face, adding a human touch is vital for good communications. Repetition of contact allows development of channels for the group to become a trusted conduit for information flow, to and from the group.

- Communications out from a group allows credible, consistent messaging from a representative organisation. A group is able to moderate and find consensus so that messages will be listened to and taken seriously.
- Equally the reverse applies for information to a group. The efficiency of engagement that a user group offers to regional authorities is a powerful incentive.

Relationships are a crucial component of communications and identifying who in organisations a group is going to deal with is important.

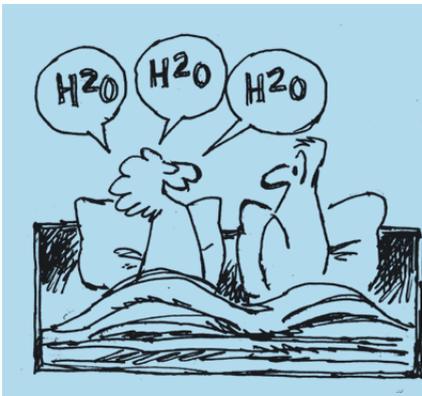
### Translation

Within communication there is translation. Clarity of thought, meaning and delivery is vital. Messages once conveyed are difficult to retract and the consequences of losing trust and credibility are hard to overcome.

Having personnel within a group such as consultants that can interpret processes and explain technical information can be invaluable.

### Consistency

Consistent communications build trust and respect. Keeping communication going even when there is nothing specific to communicate is important. By ringing and having a yarn, what one party sees as a non-issue can be vastly different through another set of ears.



### ELLESMERE – TRANSLATION

The Ellesmere group in central Canterbury has been fortunate to have access to a former consultant environmental planner. Having sound knowledge of processes and a high level of understanding of the effect of decisions has been invaluable dealing with consent and plan reviews. The former planner is married to an Ellesmere group member, illustrating how important it is to use all connections.

## ASHBURTON – CULTURE

The group has a very strong ethos of fairness and trust. They have a stated objective to “Equitably manage water takes from the Ashburton River”. This defined objective and a very deliberate apolitical stance is seen as a reason that everyone got involved and behind what they were trying to achieve.

The comment “... for us the opportunity was – resources are there – so let’s utilise them – for the community good” sums up the culture of this group.

### Culture

The culture of groups has an influence on how they are perceived and how they are able to operate. Open minded, forward thinking and constructive attitudes allow opportunities to be explored.

### PURPOSE

**If you don’t know where you are going any road will get you there.**

A purpose often aligns with the catalyst that initiated the group. This is important because it gives a tangible reason to exist and momentum to get going. However it does not necessarily need to be the only purpose or even a purpose that carries on.

It is important to define the purpose. Clear, deliberate objectives mean that members are aware of, and can relate to why the group exists. Boundaries enable a focus on the important issues and avoid resources being side tracked. A clearly defined and stated purpose reinforces to councils and other stakeholder’s what a group represents.

## DUNSANDEL AND ELLESMERE – COOPERATION

The neighbouring Ellesmere and Dunsandel groups have harnessed their collective power and coordinated research and extension work in their catchment through IrrigationNZ. Local climate stations have been installed and farmers have participated in benchmarking and Audited Self Management programmes.



The purpose is what you want it to be but could include:

1. Communication
2. Protection of position/advocacy
3. Water management
4. Future supply
5. Coordination and collective purchase
6. Advisory
7. Networking

As groups mature the role they play can change. As trust, respect and knowledge are built up over time roles alter and can include advisory, consultative and supporting capacity to regional councils and other irrigators.

## REPRESENTATION

### **Appropriate representation ensures credibility.**

It is important to recognise who the group represents. To ensure credibility and allow a mandate membership needs to reflect the majority of position. Membership can be tailored to the purpose. For instance, it will differ between groups exploring the likelihood and future benefits of a new water supply on a regional scale from groups formed to influence plan reviews within specific areas.

When setting up a group an initial step is to compile a comprehensive list of prospective members. Often the local knowledge of those involved will come up with a better list than that held by a regional authority.

## FRANKLIN – ROLE CHANGE

On the back of a strong relationship built up over the years the group has an advisory and consultative role with the Auckland council. They support council endeavours to put in test bores, gathering data on water use and the recent installations of water meters. Council recommendations are relayed through the group for endorsement as *“...they (AC) felt that it would be better if it came through us.”*

## WAIMEA – REPRESENTATION

The Waimea Water Augmentation Committee (WWAC) was set up to find a long term solution to acute water shortages on the Waimea Plains near Nelson. To exploring water storage possibilities a wide range of stakeholders has been included. Representation from council, Iwi, existing irrigation interests, Fish and Game and DoC have been given equal input ensuring a balanced approach.

## STRUCTURE

### Allows identity and longevity.

Structure is what binds all of the other elements of leadership, representation, purpose and communication together. One of the deciding factors when considering structure is the purpose of the group.

The main options and their suitability for different purposes are illustrated below. These are indicative only and for a full analysis of different structures go to the IrrigationNZ website [www.irrigationnz.co.nz](http://www.irrigationnz.co.nz)

The illustration below shows different structure options and where they might best fit along the continuum of purposes.



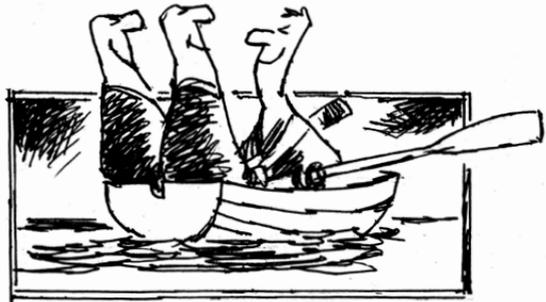
Things to consider when deciding on structure:

#### **Purpose**

Structure needs to fit the purpose.

#### **Informal versus formal**

Depending on the purpose and culture of the group an informal committee structure could suffice.



#### **Support available**

Strong support and representation from regional authorities or others can provide a surrogate structure. This is workable provided it does not conflict with a group's purpose.

#### **Level of activity and responsibility**

Different structures allow different activities. Formal legal entities such as companies or incorporated societies allow more freedom to operate commercially than informal structures

#### **Perception**

Different structures portray different images to stakeholders. A structure that is commercially orientated may not be the ideal structure for an advocacy purpose.

### **Succession**

Without formal processes to elect officers the burden may fall on one or two people to carry the group. When they leave there can be a void that may be difficult to fill.

### **Structure progression**

As groups mature they may change focus and activities. It may be necessary for a group to shed many skins as it progresses.

### **Legal and financial obligations**

Formal structures have obligations to be met. At the outset a key decision is whether the group will be responsible for large sums of money and then to structure the group in a way that ensures security and ease of operation from a financial perspective.

### **Institutional knowledge**

The level of connection, stability and longevity of personnel within a group and community, in comparison to regional and district councils is an advantage. Over time the knowledge and experience gained becomes a powerful tool for the benefit of groups. A structure that allows progression and succession will be able to retain the knowledge and experience.

### **ORARI – PERCEPTION**

The Orari Water Users Group was set up to take part in a plan review of river flow and allocation. The purpose was very much an advocacy role. It was considered that a company structure would send the wrong messages to other stakeholders, potentially compromising the good will of negotiations around the plan review. The decision to use an incorporated society structure was seen to be more inclusive and non-threatening.

### **AWATERE – LONGEVITY**

Since the Awatere Water User Group formation in 1994 the Awatere District has undergone significant land use and accompanying demographic changes. Over this period the group's personnel has changed three times. Having a confirmed structure has meant seamless changes, consistency and retention of knowledge.



## KAKANUI – STATUS

The Kakanui river in North Otago has a strong user group associated with it. A Water Allocation Committee (WAC) is set up under the regional plan as a sub-committee of Otago Regional Council (ORC). The WAC has five irrigators elected every three years by the water users. They then elect a chairman who ORC deal with on a daily basis. Each of the WAC members has a reach of the river they are responsible for, letting people know of roster changes etc. A key feature is that they are able to manipulate the roster to meet farm needs. This type of management would not be possible from the council and the status afforded the group as a sub-committee of ORC allows this to occur with a high level of confidence.

### STATUS

#### **To be effective status means recognition.**

As user groups play a larger role in resource management gaining status within regional and catchment plans will give them teeth. Integration into regional council hierarchy via committee of council, Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or other mechanisms will be seen as necessary. To be elevated to this position a robust, auditable, and credible structure is required.

### RESOURCING

#### **'Skin in the game' ensures continued engagement.**

User group administration and involvement requires resources and can be time consuming. Attending meetings, travel, administration and communication costs are not insignificant if the group is to be effective. To cover these costs financial resourcing is required.

Funds and resources can be sourced from:

- Regional and local councils
- Annual membership subscriptions
- Industry bodies
- Grants.

Often groups piggy back off other organisations, principally councils, to help resource and administer them. This can be effective depending on the purpose and relationships but may restrict independence.

To guarantee autonomy and maintain engagement, requiring members to have a financial commitment to the group ensures involvement. An annual subscription means they have 'skin in the game'. The ability to raise funds is critical so groups can deal proactively with issues.

Before accessing government and industry funds some minimum requirements will need to be met. For example a formal structure will be required so that there is accountability.

# Action

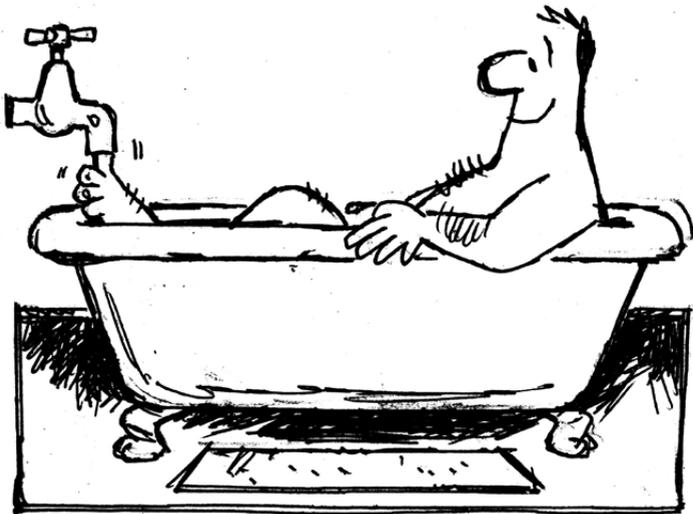
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The establishment of irrigator user groups go hand in hand with successful water management in New Zealand. Collective effort will achieve consensus of direction and action. The local solutions to local problems concept is hard to argue against.

User groups will pull community leaders together; provide robust structure and governance and enable communication networks. They provide a 'sounding board' – drawing on knowledge and experience to share learning's, allow the 'hard discussions' between users and act as a conduit between groups, regional authorities and industries.

The opportunity is now to take ownership of the issues, ensuring success of your business, gaining credibility within the community and the management of your water resource.

The challenge is to form groups ahead of the traditional catalysts. Regional councils recognise that to be able to deliver environmental, social, cultural and economic outcomes, they need efficient means of engaging with farmers. User groups that are representative, credible and function well are the logical vehicle to use – Get involved!



# Acknowledgements

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Many thanks must be extended to existing user group members, the regional and district council personnel and others that INZ have spoken to while researching this booklet. In particular Chris Allen (Ashburton), Guy Lissaman (Awatere), Ru Collins (Twyford) and Doug Gellert (Franklin) for their time allowing in-depth case study and Carey Barnett for the opening comments and insight along the way. Thanks also to Janine Holland for ruthless editing, Malcolm Evans for aptly illustrating, and Rosie Fenton for bringing it all together.

This project would not have been possible without funding support from the Ministry for Primary Industries Sustainable Farming Fund (SFF), alongside regional council and primary industry body contributions.

Full text of the user group guide, details of the case studies, regional council interviews and governance structure options are available on the Irrigation New Zealand website [www.irrigationnz.co.nz](http://www.irrigationnz.co.nz).

For your reference a list of water user groups, organisations and professionals that work with the industry is provided.

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Illustrations © Malcolm Evans, <http://evanscartoons.com/>

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Further resources available at [www.irrigationnz.co.nz/irrigators/irrigator-user-groups](http://www.irrigationnz.co.nz/irrigators/irrigator-user-groups)



