

# THE RON COCKS MEMORIAL AWARD

FOR OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP IN IRRIGATION

## Bob Engelbrecht Ron Cocks Memorial Award Winner 2014

Bob Engelbrecht credits fellow Ashburtonian Brian Cameron for introducing him to the potential of irrigation. The now nearly-retired farm business consultant and rural valuer enjoyed a close working relationship with the 2012 recipient of the Ron Cocks Memorial Award and says Brian's pioneering efforts to drill water in Mid Canterbury influenced his thinking.

"I can remember going out there in 1968 when Brian had a well driller punching a well and thinking that's a bit crazy. But it turned out his experimentation was logical and from there overhead spray irrigation from groundwater developed."

Engelbrecht has been one of the pre-eminent farm business consultants in Canterbury for nearly five decades. His contributions to agribusiness have been recognized through a series of awards including a Lincoln University Medal 18 months ago for his contribution to the university and agriculture, a Lincoln University 125th Medal and Fellowships from the New Zealand Institute of Primary Industry Management and the New Zealand Property Institute.

As a founding member of the New Zealand Irrigation Association in 1978, Engelbrecht was inaugural secretary from 1978 to 1986. He still retains copies of proceedings from early conferences. In 1986 he was awarded first Honorary Member in recognition of his voluntary service and went onto become chairman, secretary, treasurer and newsletter editor of the New Zealand Irrigation Association when it was reformed in 2001. It was rebranded as Irrigation New Zealand in 2004.

His views on irrigation are simple – his district would not be where it is today without it. "The Seafeld/Pendarves/Dorie part of Ashburton District in the mid 80s when we had the Rogernomics downtown was regarded by many as the area in New Zealand where you didn't want to go farming. The chances are you would go broke because of the soils in this part of the world. But it wasn't the soils; it was low and erratic rainfall. And once irrigation was applied it changed everyone's perspective. It's now gone from being the least desirable farming area in New Zealand to the most desirable. This is confirmed by the number of dairy farmers from the North Island who have come down here simply because of the reliability of production," says Engelbrecht.

Technological developments have produced some of the biggest gains for irrigators, says Engelbrecht, who advised farmers as they moved from wild flood and border dyke irrigation to auto border dykes, hand shift spray and gun irrigators over the years. Today's centre pivots with corner arms



or Z arms that reach into paddock corners, as well as variable rate irrigation, emphasise how far the industry has come, he says.

One of Engelbrecht's greatest bugbears is inaccurate perceptions some New Zealanders hold about the industry.

"Often, urban people ask me 'why don't the irrigators get up to date?'. But all the irrigation farmers I know have already been through a number of changes and it comes at significant cost. It is difficult to imagine the technology changes that will occur in the future but rest assured they will happen."

He also takes issue when people speak of a national water shortage.

"A lot of people think that once water is used it's gone forever. But there's no more

or no less water in the world today than there was a million years ago. From an irrigation perspective it's only borrowed and it's returned through evapo transpiration and various food and other products."

During his career, Engelbrecht helped found farm management consulting company Engelbrecht, Royds, Smith and Tavendale, and was involved in other consulting partnerships and now operates as Bob Engelbrecht Consultancy Ltd. His voluntary support of the New Zealand Irrigation Association and later on Irrigation New Zealand was juggled around consultancy work, but he credits inaugural CEO Terry Heiler with creating the changes and momentum in the organisation as it now exists.

"In the early years I was handling everything. I was trying to run my own business as well so it was pretty demanding. Looking back now it's very satisfying that we managed to hang in there until 2004 when Irrigation New Zealand really took off."

Engelbrecht attributes much of his success to his wife and family who he says has supported his career and voluntary work without complaint, even when it left her a 'work widow' for long periods.

"Without her tolerance and contribution it would have been difficult to do what I did."

Engelbrecht's contribution to the creation of the former association and today's Irrigation New Zealand cannot be under-estimated. He had a vision alongside close friend Brian Cameron of a thriving community of irrigation professionals which indeed has now developed.

