

THE RON COCKS MEMORIAL AWARD

FOR OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP IN IRRIGATION

Grant McFadden Ron Cocks Memorial Award Winner 2014

Grant McFadden has an encyclopedic knowledge of New Zealand's irrigation history, which is not surprising as the Government official who oversaw much of the early restructuring of the sector.

Now retired, McFadden still keeps a close eye on water developments, especially given his role as a member of the steering group which designed and developed the Canterbury Water Management Strategy (CWMS) and set targets for district and regional committees to assess from their perspective.

McFadden started his career as a MAF farm advisor in the mid 1960s alongside Bob Engelbrecht in Ashburton District. Within a few years he became involved in efforts to create the New Zealand Irrigation Association. He was a member of the Steering Committee and first board and also part of the group which revived the association in 2001 which saw him back on the board until 2006.

The sticking point initially was getting farmers to sign up. "We had quite strong membership from rural professionals, farm advisors and engineers. But we didn't have strong enough leadership from farmers and farming leaders themselves." The break-through in McFadden's eyes was the appointment of Graeme Sutton as Chairman. "He turned the thing around and it's gone from strength to strength since."

Watching irrigation develop in Ashburton District in the 1970s was "pretty exciting" says McFadden. He spent a lot of time helping farmers prepare funding proposals for partial irrigation. "It was damned expensive so the farmers would stretch the water as far as it could go."

McFadden was then transferred to Oamaru to assist farmers with the information needed for a positive vote on the Lower Waitaki Irrigation Scheme. This led to a career highlight - working with the scheme's chairman Sid Hurst.

"It was during my time in Oamaru that I really became aware that you have to talk about water for the whole community, not just the farmer. Sid was a huge influence on me when I became involved in the CWMS as North Otago was a prime example of how important those community relationships are."

In the early 80s, McFadden returned to Christchurch and worked on adjustment programmes to support farmers going through deregulation and drought experiences.

"It was then I realised there were opportunities in the policy area to make a real difference to people." McFadden moved into policy work and never looked back.



In 1988 the Government closed the Ministry of Works and MAF, with six weeks notice, was handed responsibility for running the country's 38 irrigation schemes and preparing them for sale. McFadden recruited and managed a small team of mainly ex Ministry of Works' engineers who were initially told the sales should take two to three years and not to contract staff for long periods.

"That period gave me a really good insight into the mechanics and politics of irrigation scheme issues which was really helpful," he says.

Despite the Government's optimistic forecast, the legalities were more complex than expected with some individual farmer's issues not being resolved for close to 20 years.

In the 90s McFadden was involved in managing many research contracts dealing with the sustainability of irrigation systems particularly with reference to the economics of irrigation and the efficiency of water use. He considers one of the industry milestones has been the way both the schemes and farmers have rapidly implemented techniques for more efficient distribution systems and for increased on farm application efficiency. He considers another milestone has been the development of the principles and local community process of the CWMS. He played a leading role in this as an initial instigator of funding through MAF and as a Steering Group Committee member.

"Although I went in with an agricultural background, we had to be sure we genuinely took into account the values of all the interest groups or it wasn't going to work. That's evolved into what we have now which is decisions being made in communities by people who know each other."

McFadden's passion for and knowledge of irrigation development is profound and he credits his 24 years as a farm advisor as fundamental.

"Those experiences I had with individual farmers as a farm advisor were really important in working through the design and delivery of larger projects later on. If it wasn't sensible and practical it wouldn't work."

He looks back with great fondness on a career spent working with many skilled professionals including farmers and farm advisors, former Catchment Board staff and engineers and MAF Policy and regional council staff.

"It's been a good area to work in."

