

Article for Tasmanian Country paper

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Managing water for future farming

We are all conscious of our water use, especially over summer. For farmers, water is a much more complex topic. “Tasmanian farmers have to buy water rights to cover at least 30 per cent of the cost to construct a new irrigation scheme,” water management researcher Melle Nikkels said. “Irrigation schemes are a big investment for farmers as well as for the State and decisions about their design and management need careful thought,” he said.

Mr Nikkels is a PhD candidate with the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) and the world’s leading university of agriculture in the Netherlands – Wageningen.. In the last two years, as part of his research, he ran water management workshops in the Coal River Valley with local farmers, water managers, and policy makers. “The workshops were an opportunity to share perspectives, learn from each other, and ultimately improve water management and policy making,” Mr Nikkels said.

“The Coal Valley is moving from dryland to irrigated farming but not all farmers invested in water infrastructure. Some of the research participants decided against investing because of short-term budget priorities or for other valid personal reasons. Those who decided to invest often see irrigation water licences as an asset – a long-term investment and an essential component to a profitable business. My results indicate that valuation of water is personal and differs between neighbours and that farmers’ demand for water and willingness to pay changes over time. Better understanding of the different perspectives is really important for both designing and managing schemes.” he said.

Mr Nikkels said there are differences and similarities between water management in Tasmania, compared with the Netherlands, where he is from. “Water infrastructure is very different in the Netherlands because much of the country is flat and below sea level. Without the dikes and effective water management, the Netherlands would be flooded,” he said. “We have over 18,000 km of dikes. We even have systems so that the water table can be adjusted on a daily basis. With such massive water management needs, Dutch decision makers cannot build infrastructure that they later regret. Dutch policy makers acknowledge that they don’t know how the future will play out, so the infrastructure must work for multiple scenarios.” Like the Netherlands, water availability in Tasmania is high on the political agenda, as farmers are crucial to reach the government’s long-term objective to increase the annual value of Tasmania’s agriculture to \$10 billion by 2050,” he said. “I don’t think

anyone knows how much water is needed to achieve this goal but I expect that some of the infrastructure does not deliver full potential and might be regretted in 2050”

Based on his research, Mr Nikkels has some recommendations for Tasmanian policy development:

“All stakeholder need to explore what the future will look like, acknowledge the complexities and share information, They also recommend to actively collaborate and learn together to be able to better manage together and in that process, I hope “no regret thinking” will guide the design processes of future schemes.”