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Water infrastructure dammed if you don't

BY TIA

SHOULD farmers be leading the way on water?

There are just eight words in that sentence and some of you are already bitterly shaking your head in frustration or vigorously nodding in agreement.

Just the question of what to do with our water can cause anxieties to bubble to the surface. Depending on your view it could mean taking on unnecessary debt or ensuring your kids have enough water to keep the pasture green in the face of climate change.

Researchers at the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) are trying to get to the bottom of the problem of water infrastructure and irrigation schemes with a new community-wide study.

TIA researcher Melle Nikkels met farmers, water managers and policy makers in the Coal River Valley to try and understand the different perspectives on the water issue.

"The goal is to ultimately improve policy and how we manage our most crucial resource," Mr Nikkels said.

The Coal River Valley is moving from dry-land to irrigated farming, but not all farmers have invested in upgrades to water infrastructure. At least 30 per cent

of the cost to construct a new irrigation scheme must be paid for by Tasmanian farmers, but TIA's research found that farmers' demand for water and willingness to pay can change dramatically over time.

"Some of the research participants decided against investing because of short-term budget priorities or for other personal reasons. Those who decided to invest tend to view water rights as an asset; a long-term investment and an essential component to a profitable business."

It begs the question: Are we comfortable with the average person dictating how water systems should be built, or should farmers be investing in and building the system to ensure their needs are met well into the future?

Mr Nikkels' homeland, the Netherlands, faces a different water management challenge that still contains useful lessons for Tasmania.

"Dutch decision makers cannot afford to ignore the infrastructure, or we would be completely under water," he said.

Water infrastructure is very different in Holland because much of the country is flat and below sea level. Without effective water management, the Netherlands would be flooded constantly.

"We have over 18,000 kilometres of dikes. We have large hydraulic dams and systems so that the water table can be adjusted on a daily basis. Policy makers can't predict the future, so the infrastructure must work for multiple scenarios depending on how our world changes."

Whether you think taking on the cost of new water systems is the best bet to ensure your livelihood or another unfair burden for our farmers to bear, the issue

of water management isn't going away.

"I don't think anyone knows just how much water

is needed to increase the annual value of our agriculture industry to \$10 billion, but the discussions we had in-

dicade that our farmers may need more investment than anticipated to meet their full potential," he said.



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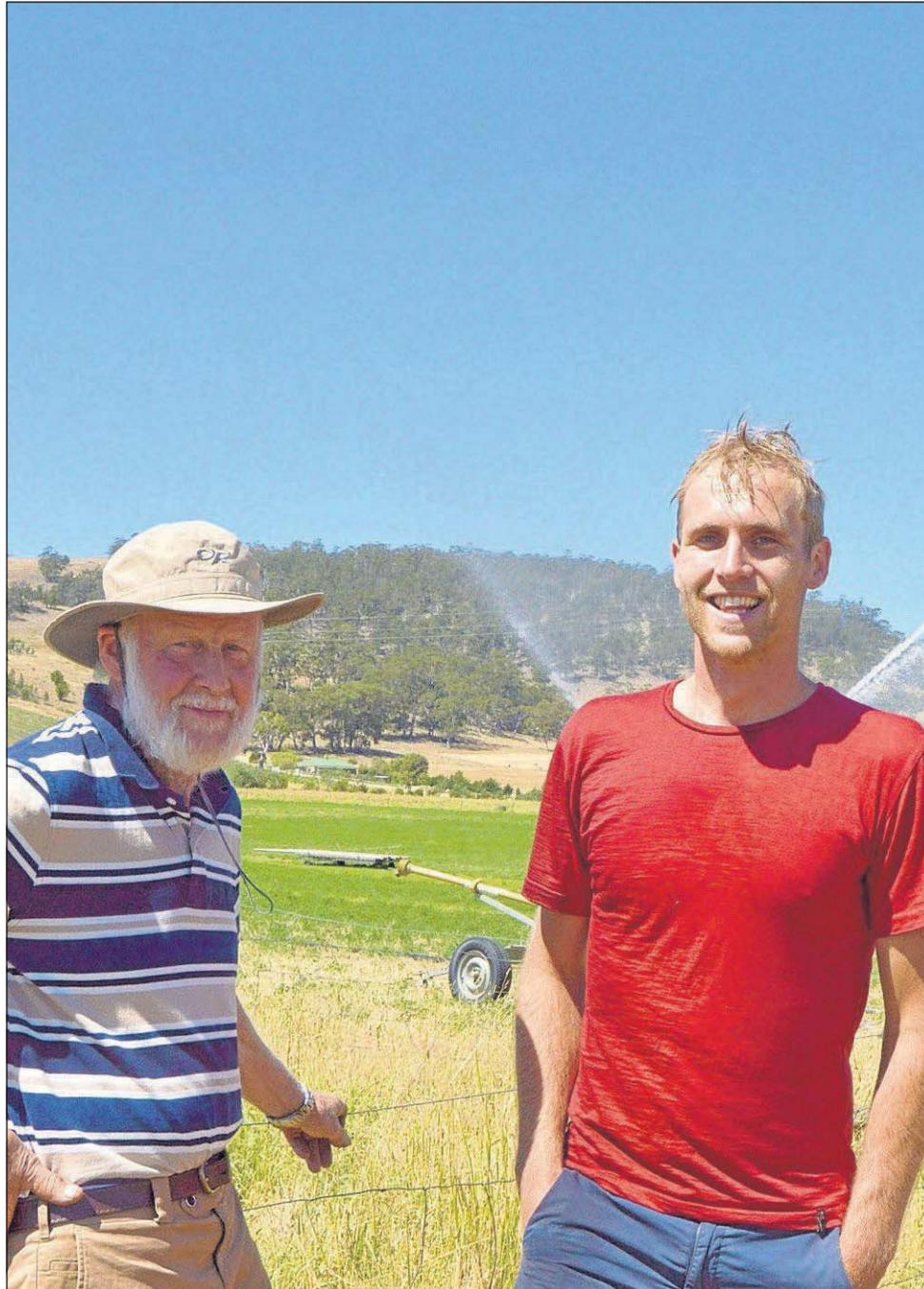
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IRRIGATION SCHEMES: Coal River Valley farmer Neville Mendham and TIA researcher Melle Nikkels. CRV is moving from dry-land to irrigated farming. **Picture: Supplied**