

# realistic alternative

**F**ROM reading articles in your June 30 edition and Hawke's Bay newspapers, it seems Ruataniwha Dam is seen as the all-encompassing solution to Central Hawke's Bay's economic woes.

It was described as the main measure that would drought-proof the region's agricultural industry and as such was a necessity.

I think those views are short-sighted and blinkered. They don't take into account other options that are available to lift economic performance and growth for the district.

They also conveniently omit dealing with the causes of the economic decline, and attempt, as so many of these "think-big" schemes do, to treat the symptoms – it's the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff rather than the fence at the top.

It is also an attempt to farm against nature, rather than with it.

The scheme has also been touted as creating an additional 2000–2500 new jobs. Can anyone please explain how this figure was arrived at and how sustainable it is?

Increased incidence of droughts can be partly blamed for economic decline, but to anyone with a modicum of economic knowledge it is clear the main reasons were the decline, for many reasons, of the wool and meat industries.

The decline resulted in the closure of many freezing works and processing plants across New Zealand, as well as a huge reduction in the number of sheep over the past 20 years.

Remember the days when up to 40,000 sheep were offered at the saleyards in Waipukurau, which closed long ago?

That led to a reduction in jobs available across the sectors and the ensuing reduction in the populations of many rural towns.

Fortunately the latest Meat Industry Excellence group and wool initiatives are attempting to reverse the situation, and I wish them every success.

Many farmers have not kept pace with the changing climate and as a result have been caught out during the past two droughts in our region.

That resulted in many having to dump stock on an overheated market, resulting in an oversupply and the resulting crash in prices, for farmers as well as the meat processors, who had to try to sell the glut on overseas markets.

That was followed by a year in which, naturally, stock numbers available for slaughter were reduced considerably, resulting in a boom year for farmers with enough stock left to sell and a record loss-making year for the main meat processors.

Other causes included the ever-increasing size of farms and more

people moving off the land as a result.

Farms are becoming more expensive and less affordable – how can we expect aspiring young farmers to raise huge loans to be able to afford their first farm?

Is there a realistic alternative to the dam?

I believe there is, and it will be a lot more cost-effective, as well as increase employment.

Doug Avery's recent "Beyond a reasonable drought" road show, which packed the Waipawa venue, was informative and encouraging.

Doug is living proof that your farm can be drought-proofed without irrigation by planting lucerne and other drought-tolerant pasture species.

He was on the point of walking off the farm, with one employee, and now has a thriving enterprise, with six employees.

That is pretty convincing to me.

And that is in an area of Marlborough with an average annual rainfall of 650mm – about 150mm a year less than the part of Central Hawke's Bay I live in.

It takes just a few sums and some lateral thought to figure this out, and it would be dumb not to consider what Doug did as a viable alternative to irrigation, for sheep-and-beef farmers anyway.

Farming with nature makes economic sense and racking up more debt to buy into the scheme, not to mention installing the infrastructure, at a time when interest rates are rising seems like too much of a gamble to me.

Onfarm water storage seems a sounder investment, more environmentally sustainable, as well as more acceptable to consumers, who are becoming ever more aware of the environmental impact of farming.

So why is there such huge pressure to build this dam?

I suspect that, first, Hawke's Bay Regional Council has considerably under-estimated underground water resources and over-allocated irrigation consents, forcing it to consider a scheme such as Ruataniwha.

Withdrawing or reducing consents to farmers now hooked on irrigation water, with large debts to pay off, would be unthinkable without a readily available alternative source to migrate to. Second, there are many vested interests that will do well out of the scheme, including banks, irrigation retailers and installers and those looking forward to a handsome capital gain as a result of increasing land value.

Is the dam the only way to drought-proof the district's farms,

# to dam

and revive the district's economy? To those who can think outside the conventional square, the answer is obvious.

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**Doug (Avery) is living proof that your farm can be drought-proofed without irrigation by planting lucerne and other drought-tolerant pasture species.**

**OTHER OPTIONS: Waipukurau sheep-and-beef farmer**

**Dan Elderkamp**