



Wild Rivers, Part Four

by Quentin Duthie

The upper Hurunui River North branch, recently recommended for a Water Conservation Order, Lake Sumner Forest Park, Canterbury Photos: Shaun Barnett/Black Robin Photography.

The Wild Rivers campaign continues to gather momentum. By the time you read this, the campaign will be publicly launched. One of the first actions is to celebrate wild river values and educate the public about the threats that face them. A 'Day on a Wild River' event is planned for the weekend of 28-29 November. Many FMC clubs will participate and we hope you can join us too.

Also by the time you read this, a decision by council commissioners on the fate of the wild Mokihinui River (see *FMC Bulletin* August 2008) will be known, and likely, appealed. Meridian's dam proposal would not only destroy a pristine wild river gorge, but is unnecessary, given two other large-scale hydro options on the West Coast

(the Arnold scheme and the Stockton Hydro Project) that will fulfil local energy needs with minimal impact on unmodified wild rivers.

In each of these schemes, the proponents have argued for the benefit of West Coast power self-sufficiency. However, in an alarming twist, 'meeting demand' now seems to be replaced by turning hydro into an export opportunity. The West Coast Regional Council would like to turn the Coast into an 'electricity generation centre' to 'explicitly promote the West Coast as an ideal region to export hydro power to the rest of New Zealand.' The West Coast is certainly renowned for its rainfall and rivers, and clearly tourism – the most important industry and largest employer – is based around wild rivers and glaciers. Damming wild West Coast rivers would be a terrible mistake. We also know that government RMA reformers are considering making access to conservation land easier for hydro dams. These developments show the need for strong wild river advocacy, and your support has become all the more important.

Meanwhile, across the main divide, the proposed Water Conservation Order (WCO) for

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the Hurunui River has met only partial success. FMC supported Fish and Game's application for a WCO to preserve the two upper branches in their natural state, and ensure adequate flow and water quality of the lower river. The Tribunal subsequently approved the WCO on the North (Lake Sumner) Branch, but declined it for the South Branch. Little difference exists between the 'nationally outstanding' characteristics of the two branches, and being part of the same river, any development to one will impact on the character of the other. The decision seems like an attempt to find a compromise solution, and will likely be appealed.

Despite the WCO approval for the North Branch and much of the lower river, developers promptly lodged applications to install a weir on Lake Sumner to raise its level, and a 75-metre-high dam, with a seven-kilometre-long reservoir on the South Branch, and to take water for irrigation that would reduce the lower river flow by 32 cumecs. What is most galling is that a 2007 Canterbury Strategic Water Study, involving industry and environmental stakeholders, agreed on a low-impact farmland water storage proposal in preference to developing the wild Hurunui River. The WCO application would not have affected that proposal. Perhaps emboldened by the election of a new government, the developers have abandoned the agreed option and applied for high-impact damming of the Hurunui.

In the North Island, the Wairarapa Irrigation Trust has plans for water storage and irrigation. The Trust's original proposal involved dams on four separate wild rivers within Tararua Forest Park – the Tauherenikau, Waiohine, Waingawa and Ruamahanga. The Trust recently assured Forest and Bird that dams are not on the cards, but FMC and other Wild Rivers campaigners will remain vigilant. The Tararua Range is 'the home of tramping in New Zealand', and battles to protect it from dams have been won and lost in the past – the Otaki still flows freely from source to sea because of a 1970s campaign, but the Mangahao was dammed in 1924 for 38MW of power.

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Even more alarming is the recent statement of the Minister of Agriculture, David Carter, that Water Conservation Orders are 'a very blunt type of process' and he 'would expect the Land and Water Forum will look quite seriously on whether this mechanism has outlived its usefulness'. WCOs remain the primary tool for protecting 'nationally outstanding' rivers from dams and major irrigation takes. Just whether the Minister envisages some other form of protection or no protection at all remains unknown. Or whether he thinks the WCOs on rivers like the Motu, Mohaka, Buller and Rakaia should be removed. Such a proposal would be outrageous, given the current situation whereby New Zealand has a mere 16 WCOs and has increasing pressure on our remaining wild rivers for hydro and irrigation. Addressing the ever-growing and unsustainable demand for electricity and farming intensification is the only solution.

Former *Bulletin* editor John Rhodes enjoying a day trip down the lower Waiohine Gorge, Tararua Forest Park



FMC and other Wild Rivers campaigners are part of the Land and Water Forum. They will advocate for wild river conservation and recreation values as part of a collaborative governance process. This attempts to find a durable and acceptable reform proposal for the way New Zealand regulates and prices water management. While the primary focus is on the lowland issues of water pollution and over-allocation of scarce water resources, it will inevitably impact on the legal protection of wild rivers, including WCOs and conservation land protection. Wild River campaigners will seek much more secure protection for our wild rivers.

In the meantime, FMC encourages you to check our website (www.fmc.org.nz) for event details of your local 'Day on a Wild River', and get involved. Only by promoting the wild and sustainable values of our rivers can we hope to stem the tide of threats that our precious rivers now face.

The Waiohine River, taken from the new footbridge at the Walls Whare road end, Tararua Forest Park, Wairarapa

