

**INVESTIGATION INTO RIVER  
MANAGEMENT OF A SECTION OF  
THE RUAMAHANGA RIVER**

**OCTOBER 1989**

Parliamentary Commissioner  
for the Environment  
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*Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata*

## **THE COMPLAINT**

The complaint is that the policy decision of the Wairarapa Catchment Board to adopt a revised river management scheme on the stretch Double Bridges to Rathkeale of the Ruamahanga River will result in detriment to land adjoining the river in this stretch.

Although Mr G Stuart contacted the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment on the advice of Mr J Falloon MP, Mr G Stuart has also acted as spokesman for some of the affected ratepayers.

## **FACTS AND CIRCUMSTANCES GIVING RISE TO THE COMPLAINT**

River control and management works have been carried out since the 1960s on the upper Ruamahanga River but until the 1980's these works were not part of a comprehensive river control scheme. The Wairarapa Catchment Board (the Board) has carried out investigations in 1960 and 1977/78, with a River Control Scheme being approved by the then National Water and Soil Conservation Authority in 1984 (the Scheme).

In 1988 the Wairarapa Catchment Board commissioned a report from an independent consultant with the goal of determining the most appropriate overall management concept for major rivers in the Wairarapa. These management concepts had to have regard to current financial, economic and environmental constraints that are or will be present over the next few years. Stage 1 of the study looked at four representative lengths of river channel in terms of the study objectives. Stage II of the study looked in detail at specific river sections; one of these was the 4 km section, Double Bridges to Rathkeale, on the Ruamahanga River.

The consultant outlined three options for river management on this stretch of river with different widths of a design fairway. The heavy control option was formulated with a 60 m wide fairway, a retreat option with a fairway width of up to 200 m and a compromise option between the two extreme options with a 90 m wide fairway.

The Wairarapa Catchment Board adopted the compromise option of planting and channel edge strengthening as a policy to be progressively implemented. Part of the implementation of this policy has been the Board decision to remove some river works from the active channel (where the river has split the flow on either side of old river works) in order to increase the width of the active fairway.

The present upper Ruamahanga Scheme is due to end in March 1992. At this time most of the scheme budget has already been expended. A review of the objectives and

river management strategies and the means to fund these strategies will be necessary before scheme termination.

Mr G Stuart and some of the other affected ratepayers have maintained a keen interest in the effectiveness of river control works in this stretch of the river and have regularly communicated their concerns to the Board.

## PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

My functions under the Environment Act 1986 include investigating the effectiveness of environmental planning and environmental management carried out by public authorities, and advise them on any remedial action the Commissioner considers necessary (S 16 (1) (b)).

Having received the complaint from Mr G Stuart and with the Board agreeing to defer further clearing of old river works from the channel, I decided to visit the area on 22 August 1989 with a member of my staff. We first met with officers of the Board who showed us a series of aerial photographs of this stretch of the Ruamahanga River taken over the past 12 months. The changes in locations of the main channel, the opening up of back channels, the bank attack at various locations served to illustrate the characteristics of a gravel bearing river and the problems inherent in its river management.

We then met with Mr G Stuart who took us to the river and to Racecourse Corner before a meeting with some of the ratepayers on this stretch of river, together with representatives of associated organisations. The farmers expressed concern that their local knowledge of the river was not taken into account and they were also concerned about the amount of land that should be retired for the vegetated buffer zones.

Further correspondence with the Board, the independent consultant and other public authority officials resulted in the information in this preliminary investigation.

There are several points at issue

### 1. THE WIDTH OF THE ACTIVE CHANNEL

There is a fundamental difference in approach between the Board and Mr G Stuart on what should be the width of the active channel in this stretch of the river. The partial strengthening and planting option adopted by the Board calls for an active width of 90 m in contrast to Mr G Stuart's suggestion of a 60 m width and the present 30 - 35 m width at Racecourse Corner. The Board has, however, resolved not to accept a 60 m river width at this location, but has preferred to gradually implement the policy goal of a 90 m fairway.

The effect on confining the river at this point is that the river channel acts like a venturi and speeds up the passage of the water and the gravel being worked down the river. When the river flow slows down, as is likely, gravel or river sediment will be deposited downstream and may put downstream assets at risk from flooding from even minor freshes in the river. The most valuable asset in this stretch of the river is Rathkeale College and grounds situated at the

downstream end. Rathkeale College is "protected" from flooding by a stopbank and by a cut-off channel which has not yet had to operate in its 6 years of existence. The effect of gravel aggradation is discussed later.

Confining the river may also cause problems in times of major flood events. Over the last year there have been numerous floods in the river and the river has continually broken out, with a severe breakout eroding away a bay on one of Mr G Stuart's paddocks. The independent consultant commented that "the whole length of the confined channel remains highly vulnerable to breakouts and at present (September 1988) a second main channel exists outside and parallel to the defined channel along a substantial proportion of the reach". The Board has notified me (8 September 1989) that they now have blocked off the side channel that had opened up above Racecourse Corner.

The farmers who met with us are convinced that the present confinement of the main channel is providing "protection" for their land and they are reluctant to see river works removed from the channel. The ongoing debate between the farmers and the Board has been hindered because the objectives of implementing the original river control works and the 1984 Scheme were not clearly spelt out. This has led to some farmer's perception, over the years, that the Board was trying different strategies for river management without sufficient regard to the "on the ground" situation.

The river needs an overall long-term approach to management. The Board has adopted a river management option in the light of changing circumstances of central government funding, falling land values and the ability of Scheme ratepayers to fund Scheme works.

## 2. AGGRADATION OF GRAVEL IN THE RIVER CHANNEL

There is a relatively constant source of supply of gravel into the Ruamahanga River and the number and characteristics of floods in the river will, to a large extent, determine how the gravel moves downstream and where gravel beaches will deposit and build up. Over the last year, this river has experienced a number of floods which means that a major reworking of bed material is taking place. A wave of gravel material is working its way down the river so that there could be some short term aggradation in any one stretch of the river. The Board has not gathered much cross-section information on the river in the past but I am informed that this situation will be rectified in the future to enable information on aggradation/degradation trends to be obtained. I have been unable to fully assess river management objectives for this river because of lack of data.

## 3. PROVISION OF BUFFER ZONES

The retiring of pasture to provide buffer zones has been an integral part of the Scheme since 1984. The partial strengthening and planting option for river management includes buffer zones of between 40 m to 140 m on each side of the 90 m river fairway. There has been little retiring and planting of land carried out

since 1984. In the present situation where river management costs will fall more and more on the affected ratepayers, the provision of buffer zones and planting appears to be the most practicable and cost-effective option for long-term river management. However, implementing this option may be philosophically difficult when farmers have relied on in-river works in the past. Some of the farmers I met with were unhappy with the amount of their land that should be retired under the reviewed scheme and would have preferred to have buffer zones of 30 m minimum. If planting does not go ahead in the long-term, then the farmers will have the risk that they may lose their land through bank attack or by breaking out. The Board has informed me that issues of adequate fencing and the incorporation of buffer zones will not be comprehensively addressed until the scheme is reviewed. Some attention will need to be given to what amount of land should be excluded from stock and how much land should be temporarily retired to enable trees to be established.

#### 4. CONSULTATION

There has been extensive consultation between Mr G Stuart, other affected ratepayers, the Board and its staff in past years on river management for this stretch of the Ruamahanga River. More recently the farmers have met both with the Board staff and the independent consultant over the review of the Ruamahanga scheme on several occasions.

Every river management scheme in the Board's region has an advisory committee which meets at regular intervals and can make recommendations to Board meetings. On the upper Ruamahanga Scheme there are six separate advisory committees since the river itself can be administratively divided into six reaches by natural features. However, such fragmentation does not usually lead to an appreciation of the overall management of a river system.

Cooperation between the community and the public agencies is essential for good environmental management. The responsibility for environmental management should be shared between the community which benefits directly or indirectly from the management and the public agencies which have statutory responsibilities for environmental planning and management.

The advisory committees have, in the past, sent recommendations to the Board for their consideration. The Board has taken sole responsibility for river management policy decisions. The landowners I spoke with were keen to have more involvement with the decision making process. This raises issues of accountability and liability. If faulty decisions are made on river management, the present decision makers are accountable to the voters and may be replaced at election time. If in future landowners make faulty decisions on river management will they be held liable for any property damage? These issues need to be resolved. However despite possible risks there is some advantage in having riverine landholders responsible for river management.

#### 5. FUTURE RIVER MANAGEMENT

On 1 November 1989 a new Wellington Regional Council will assume the responsibilities of the Wairarapa Catchment Board for the southern half of the Board's present region. As the present Regional Council has managed rivers in an urban environment, it may take some time for the new Regional Council to formulate river management policies for both the urban and rural sectors of the expanded region.

Any changes to river management policies could take place within the time that river management schemes would normally be reviewed, either at the end of a particular scheme or at some stage within a scheme timetable. The present upper Ruamahanga Scheme will terminate and require review in March 1992 and any further scheme proposals would be expected to take account of any regional policies. One of the most difficult matters to be addressed by the new Regional Council will be the funding of urban and rural river management schemes, particularly in the light of reducing central government involvement.

The river management policies will also need specific objectives to be set, the risks and benefits of these policies clearly spelt out and related to the land and assets both adjoining the rivers and within the whole catchment.

The new Resource Management Planning Act which is expected to be introduced into Parliament before the end of 1989 will also affect future river management planning. The Bill is expected to enable regional councils to produce natural hazard management plans. Flooding is one of the major natural hazards in New Zealand. As river management schemes are reviewed, it is likely that these broader aspects of hazard management, and catchment wide planning will lead, in the long-term, to changes in emphasis.

These administrative and legislative changes which will affect river management policies in the future will serve to move the focus of attention to the objectives for management, rather than the effectiveness of river management works. There are risks inherent in river management and whichever options are chosen, the combination of risk level and associated management strategies will not suit all affected people. What is required is an overall consistent river management strategy for each river and the progressive implementation and maintenance of any works.

## CONCLUSION

The Board has adopted the independent consultants report as a policy goal for progressive implementation, with emphasis on maintaining a clear fairway up to the termination of the present scheme. The provision of a wider fairway as a river management strategy is questioned by Mr G Stuart as a valid strategy as he would prefer to maintain a narrow active river channel.

We are faced with a preferred technical solution over a locally preferred solution. The management of one small stretch of river should not be decided in isolation from decisions on the total river and catchment management.

Management decisions are very dependent on the provision of adequate information on the nature and characteristics of a river and its catchment. I have not been able to fully assess the environmental planning and management of the upper Ruamahanga River because of a lack of data on the movement of gravel.

There is a need to continue dialogue on total river management to decide precisely what actions are in the best interest of the community and what commitment is needed to fund ameliorative efforts.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are addressed to the Wairarapa Catchment Board and its successor the new Wellington Regional Council.

1. Establish a Ruamahanga river committee comprising representatives of landholders and Regional Council with power to make decisions on management within the constraints of allocated budgets and policy.
2. Continue to pursue a consistent approach to river management and endeavour to seek agreement from the ratepayers of each scheme to the objectives of river management.
3. Develop a programme of gathering cross-section and other data in order to ascertain trends in river bed degradation or aggradation for the gravel-bearing rivers of the Wairarapa constituency.
4. Consult with scheme ratepayers on the need for vegetated buffer zones at the time of the Scheme review and the objectives of this river management strategy.
5. Amalgamate the six advisory committees of the upper Ruamahanga River at a suitable time.

Given intended changes to local government and legislative reform I have decided not to instigate a full investigation in terms of S 16 (1) (b) of the Environment Act 1986 at this time.

Helen R Hughes  
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment