

THE RON COCKS MEMORIAL AWARD

FOR OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP IN IRRIGATION

Robin Murphy

Ron Cocks Memorial Award Winner 2016

As the long-standing chairman since 1993 of Morven Glenavy Ikawai (MGI) Irrigation Company, the Glenavy dairy farmer has been a driving force behind irrigation development not only for his scheme, but for the benefit of the wider South Canterbury region.

Robin has championed and overseen several projects which have improved the viability and reach of MGI. The Redcliffs network was expanded first in 1994 by 1150ha, a project which was completed within a year taking the total command area to 2500ha. Robin is particularly proud of a Lincoln University study which suggested the upgrade would cost \$1.2 million; when, with the aid of two contractors and materials purchased, the project was brought in for \$226,000. Improved local community roads were a benefit.

A second major project was the Waihao North extension which increased irrigation in this area from 2000ha to 3000ha. Funded by local farmers, again the project was delivered within 12 months using five kilometres of pipe and 600ha of pressurised mainline.

He is particularly proud of the recent commissioning of the \$32 million Waihao Downs project. MGI merged with Waihao Downs in July 2014, with work commencing January 2015 with the build complete and water ready to flow late March 2016.

Robin credits Jonathan Kirk's vision for getting the project off the ground. "We both shared a desire to get water into Waihao Downs. The good news is that this scheme has come in under budget and before the expected completion date of January 2017."

A passion for irrigation has seen him act not only as Chairman for MGI with the support of a progressive board and staff, but until recently Robin's dedication extended to voluntary management of the company prior to the appointment of General Manager Craig Evans.

Over the years he's overseen many operational upgrades including improved race systems at Ikawai Flats and the addition of telemetry to better utilise their water.

A firm believer in the need to address environmental issues early on, when the scheme applied for consent for the northern extension, securing an environmental flow for the Waihao River was seen as vital. MGI started testing water quality before it was required under their consent. "Because we believe having information is important. Data is crucial."

Developing an environmental strategy and putting farm environment plans in place for all shareholders proved to be an advantage under Environment Canterbury's new Land and Water Plan requirements.

"The farm environment plan system to me has been absolutely tremendous. We acknowledge we haven't got everything right but they're great assets to have as we go into nutrient planning."

In terms of obstacles, Robin says the biggest issues have been getting engagement over river flows and safeguarding existing



consents on the Waitaki River when the region went through the Waitaki Plan Change. Creating the Waitaki Irrigators Collective to represent the concerns of existing irrigators and employing a policy manager Elizabeth Soal has been "invaluable".

"Going forward I can see that Environment Canterbury's plan changes are going to present the biggest challenges. However when the rules are set, innovation will kick in. There will be some massive changes as to how we implement and manage the nutrient requirements."

People's expectations around farming practice will also evolve as further technologies come on stream. Robin has seen original contour bordering move to laser levelling, followed by the impact of pivots, variable rate irrigation and soil moisture monitoring. To assist

shareholders with change, MGI is focused on making telemetry data available on the website. "We're working very hard on it now. The beauty is we have the data so we don't have to start from scratch." In hindsight, Robin would have liked this information available earlier as farm plans started in 2010, but for a small company he says they have achieved much and aspired high.

As Robin reflects on the past 50 years, alongside his role with MGI, he recently retired as Chairman of the South Canterbury Coastal Zone Committee.

Growing the irrigation network in South Canterbury has translated into a more vibrant local economy. "Certainly the benefits from irrigation are that we now have very strong schools in Glenavy and Waihao Downs. These schools are international schools and our children are exposed to different nationalities."

Helping compile the scheme's history for the book *Water Gives Life*, published in October 2014 was a personal highlight. Opening new offices in Glenavy and employing environmental manager Judith Neilson in 2014 and more recently General Manager Craig Evans are milestones for the scheme, he says. Working with local anglers to support salmon spawning by providing 50% of the feed for a spelt project reflects how the company works with its neighbours. "I believe irrigation is just part of the community. We like to think that as a company we are good citizens."

Looking to the future, Robin expects technology and innovation will provide new solutions. "It's very exciting. Irrigation will always come under pressure because of water use. So we have to be responsible in how we use it."

Robin's commitment to irrigation has taken him away from home regularly and he acknowledges the support wife May and son Bruce have provided. "I really want to thank them. I have always believed you need to be involved in your industry."

