

# THE RON COCKS MEMORIAL AWARD

FOR OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP IN IRRIGATION

## Tony Banks

### Ron Cocks Memorial Award Winner 2016

An individual described as an outstanding leader in delivering the benefits of water to Central Otago has been jointly awarded IrrigationNZ's 2016 Ron Cocks Memorial Award. The former chairman of the Earnsclough Irrigation Company, Tony Banks, has given 31 years of service to the scheme; more than half his working life, and all in a voluntary capacity. For much of that period he has also been a member of the Otago Water Resource Users Group (OWRUG) and for 18 years has been a director of the Fraser Dam Company, the benefits of which flow to four Central Otago irrigation schemes. Tony has also contributed 15 years as a director of the Clutha Pipeline Company which benefits the Earnsclough Irrigation Company and Contact Energy.



In 1985, as an orchard owner, he was asked to join the Earnsclough Irrigation committee and in 1990 was appointed chairman commenting "You can't complain about your treatment if you're not taking part." When the government decided to divest itself of irrigation schemes in the late 1980s, Tony was part of Earnsclough's negotiating team. Solid research and astute negotiations saw a compensation figure built into the sale price for the Earnsclough Irrigation Scheme based on previous promises made as part of the Clyde Dam development. Four cumecs of water from the dam was allocated to Earnsclough to supplement the unreliable supply from the Fraser River, and Tony's efforts helped ensure local irrigators walked away with not only plentiful water, but sufficient funds to upgrade and modernise the scheme's infrastructure.

"That was the bones of upgrading our scheme to ensure regular and reliable supply. Now it's probably the best supply in the country. If we can't get water out of Lake Dunstan there's also going to be a lot of lights out across the country."

Part of this project was the construction of the 4.1km of 1200mm diameter pipeline. This was a joint venture with Contact Energy to convey the water from Lake Dunstan to the Fraser River, to feed the irrigation intakes and comply with Contact's requirements to maintain a minimum flow in the Fraser.

This took place alongside the re-negotiation of the Fraser Power Agreement with the then Central Otago Electric Power Board to secure affordable pumping costs, not just for Earnsclough, but for three other Central Otago irrigation schemes.

"We were able to negotiate an approach and come to an agreement with the power board which has stood the test of time. We structured it in such a way that there is an incentive for the irrigation companies to save power," says Tony.

The 1980s and early 1990s was a period of intense change but Tony says the long hours and hard work put in by irrigators

paid off. "It was the early days when we had the challenges. When we were negotiating with MAF, the Treasury, the New Zealand Department of Electricity and then the power board, it was about securing the future of our irrigation companies for the district, because the district was suffering in the summertime. There's a huge amount of satisfaction now, not just for me, but for all the people involved."

Many Central Otago communities wouldn't have survived without water and Tony says the benefits are wider than economics. "There's no doubt that locking in supplementary water for the Fraser River has stopped it from running dry. It is now an attractive river with an improved fishery and spawning. We now have five yearly biota reports instead of annual, the improvements here have been so noticeable."

Tony is also proud of the fact the Earnsclough Irrigation Company has operated in a prudent manner using the initial capital outlay from the Crown to fund infrastructural costs so irrigators are only being charged running costs. "We've got quite a lot of money in the bank which we've invested on a conservative basis. My theory is I would rather lose \$5000 of interest than half a million dollars of capital. We see that as future proofing the scheme for when we need to replace sections of pipe or other items. Our policy is we charge water rates to cover the running costs only. Our water is \$60 per hectare. I don't know if there is a cheaper scheme in the country. Any developments we pay out of our sinking fund."

Recently Tony stepped down as Chairman of the scheme but was reappointed as a director for another year as he has unfinished business.

"We're applying to renew our water rights ahead of the 2021 deadline. We want to be proactive as we're probably using less than half of our historical rights."

Of the Ron Cocks Memorial Award, Tony says he sees it as recognition of the wider community's efforts to secure water.

"I would like to acknowledge Peter Farley, the original negotiator for the Crown and Alex Adams, the former CEO of the power board. They were both instrumental in how things developed. Murray Heckler who chaired OWRUG for many years and regularly took our case to ORC hearings, is a farmer/irrigator I admire for his outstanding efforts. That's really how I look at it. There's a team of people and a lot of work behind this. I see the Ron Cocks award as a reward for the wider team."

