

OTAGO REGIONAL POLICY STATEMENT – EVIDENCE OF RANDALL ASPINALL – SUMMARY

1. My evidence is focused on explaining the effort and work put into freshwater management by catchment groups in the Upper Clutha, specifically by the Wanaka Catchment Group
2. Numerous catchment groups have been set up throughout the Otago Region since Plan Change 6A or have transitioned from Water User or Landcare groups. Wanaka Catchment Group, that I am part of, started in 2017 but the seed of it started in 2014.
3. During Plan Change 6A a group of farmers around the Queenstown lakes went into mediation with the ORC around their proposed Overseer limits, WQ targets, stock access regulations etc. An agreement was reached however also a realisation that there was insufficient knowledge / information for either side to be able to be “right”.
4. Following this we set up a joint project with ORC, Landcare Research & the farmer group to set up a detailed Overseer trial to better calibrate its accuracy in the high country. The results of this showed a significant difference between the modelled & actual results.
5. This then led to a Beef & Lamb project on 3 properties to develop a Farm Environment Plan template that suited these types of high country properties with a significant range of soil types, climatic conditions, stock types and farm systems within a catchment. As this project concluded the Wanaka Catchment Group was formed to apply this template across more properties in the catchment.
6. Since then the group has focussed on working with farmers to develop property specific Farm Environment Plans - identifying critical source areas, other risks and potential responses. This is one uniqueness of our group that our focus is on our WQ quality expert working with individual farms under the CG umbrella rather than being focused on field days & getting people together (although we do run winter grazing workshops etc).
7. In conjunction with this the Good Water project run with the ORC established a strategic and detailed water quality sampling program to help the landowners better understand the direct link between their land use and the effects on water quality in specific locations.
8. This all led to the Wai Ora project with MfE that encourages landowners to act on some of the Critical Source Areas identified through the farm plans and Good Water project. We are currently 2 years into the Wai Ora project that has a target of 45 km of riparian fencing, 50,000 native plants and the associated stock water systems etc in the catchment.

General Points

9. While the Wai Ora project is great the over-riding intent of our catchment group is education and behaviour change. Tangible planting projects look great however real environmental change comes from people changing their mindsets and making the environment part of all the decisions they make – strategic decisions, financial decisions and day to day decisions.

10. The organic development of our CG has allowed our members to talk about their issues and then use the collective knowledge of the group to find positive solutions. This grass roots approach is more effective because each of our members are allowed to move at a pace they are comfortable with. This establishes trust and confidence within the group while there is still subtle peer pressure for change which cannot be replicated by regulation.
11. Our catchment group has a vision and has discussed implication of the freshwater visions at a high level – we do recognise that it is something we need to look at. However the uncertainty we deal with makes it difficult to commit to full engagement in the early stages:
 - a. When things settled after PC6A we broadly supported the effects based approach and established the CG which has made a lot of progress
 - b. However now PC6A has gone and we start again!!
 - c. All the while the National Standards are going through multiple iterations
12. This is all against a backdrop of a sector dealing with issues from all angles. As a catchment group we can be talking about ORC provisions, stock exclusion, Freshwater Farm Plans, He Waka Eke Noa, labour shortage, health & safety, accreditation schemes or our biosecurity threats – none of which are clear and all of which are worrying.
13. We have similar uncertainty dealing with ORC. Staff turn-over has made it difficult to get consistent support for projects. They have aided us well when we have pushed for support however we work hard at developing a good relationship with council staff, take them on farm and explain the issues, then the staff change – and we are back where we started.
14. Because of all of this our approach on Mt Aspiring Station is to take little notice of regulatory processes until they are finalised. Instead we focus on projects and management that we know are good for the environment – hoping these will stand us in good stead once it is clear what our additional requirements are.

Freshwater Vision

15. As we watch the RPS and FMU based plans develop there does not seem to be much use of or interaction with work that has already been done in detail with the local community.
16. Freshwater visions need to recognise the full spectrum of values held by our community. Currently they don't fairly reflect the benefits that accrue from productive use of water and how that underpins a lot of the social, economic and cultural activities we enjoy as a region.
17. Catchment groups like the Wanaka Catchment Group have demonstrated what can be achieved when resource users are supported and enabled to work together. The uncertainty that is created by the constant change and barrage of new regulatory intervention only stifles progress and causes people to disengage or rebel rather than make positive change.
18. Any new regime needs to recognise the utility of catchment groups and encourage them to be the first responders, so to speak. Doing that will empower these groups and the communities that make them up to implement change. In my experience that will achieve change more quickly and constructively than regulation.