

every dollar spent on drainage (capital works) the Catchment Board receives an additional 30 percent administration grant from Government. If capital works dwindle, so too does the Catchment Board empire. Third, to meet the requirements of both the on-farm and community schemes more extensive drainage works are installed than were often envisaged by the landowners.

The other major West Coast casualty of the drainage subsidies was the Kongahu Swamp near Karamea. This large flax swamp had been identified as the outstanding swamp habitat in the north-west of the South Island. Both the Kongahu and Rotokino are difficult and costly development projects. Even some local farmers privately express the opinion that they are unwise investments. Certainly, not all swamp development succeeds, the most recent failure being the Kaniere Farm Settlement near Hokitika. Lands and Survey have abandoned it as a settlement proposition after vainly trying for years to turn an intractable wetland into economic farmland.

In the last year there has been a flurry of drainage proposals on the West Coast affecting swamps previously identified by the Wildlife Service as valuable wildlife habitats. These include the Ohinetamatea, South Turnbull, Kini and Mumu Creek swamps of South Westland, the Lake Hau-piri wetlands of North Westland; and the Birchfield Swamp north of Westport.

Fire fighting by Wildlife

The proposals are being fought on a case by case basis by the Wildlife Service, Forest and Bird, and the Acclimatisation Societies through costly, time-consuming objections to water right applications. The rapid-fire drainage initiatives of the Westland Catchment Board have outstripped the capacity of the official conservation agencies to cope with them. Lands and Survey have observed that "The Wildlife Service are struggling to keep up with the work pressure having only one permanent officer in Westland and are only fighting fires by addressing each drainage application as it arises...". Fisheries Research Division is seeking funding for a sorely needed regional survey to identify the important indigenous fish habitats. Botanical and general scientific values of the wetlands are being completely ignored because of a dearth of resource information. Unless the impetus for drainage is curbed on the West Coast and elsewhere, then there is an immediate and legitimate demand for substantial extra funding to the conservation agencies. They need to be able to document the values of the remaining wetlands, assess the conservation priorities, and purchase critical wetlands in private ownership.

Political recognition of the scarcity of wetlands and of the need for effective conservation policies has been slow in coming. A major report on wetlands prepared by the Environmental Council in 1984 highlighted the need for urgent political action. It has proven to be a useful catalyst in changing official attitudes. Some of its

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Government indecision may herald a five-year subsidised blitz of the remaining West Coast wetlands. On December 3, 1985, the National Water and Soil Conservation Authority (NWASCA) supported a five-year extension of the West Coast farm drainage subsidies, provided that:

- * Wetlands with "significant natural or scenic values which would be lost or diminished by drainage" be ineligible for the subsidy.

- * An advisory group to the Westland Catchment Board (with rights of appeal to NWASCA) be established with representatives from Wildlife Service, Acclimatisation Societies and Forest and Bird to assess drainage applications.

The drainage subsidy has been retained despite widespread opposition from the public and several Cabinet Ministers. This highlights the lack of accountability of NWASCA to the public and elected Government. Wetland advocates now face continued difficulties in case by case arguments on often subjective grounds against a distorting and uneconomic subsidy. Further attrition of wetlands will take place because of inevitable compromises.

The Government must review NWASCA's decision so that subsidies are removed and replaced by incentives to preserve wetlands.

recommendations were incorporated into Labour's Natural Waters election policy. This promised permanent reserve status for wetlands of natural importance, and approvals for wetland drainage only after catchment wide evaluations show minimal adverse effects on scenic, habitat or hydrological values. Fifteen months after Labour took office these praiseworthy recommendations have not been ratified.

However, Internal Affairs Minister Peter Tapsell has been battling hard to have our remaining wetlands protected. In November 1985 he wrote in seeking the removal of drainage subsidies: "Problems of wetland loss are not confined to the West Coast. It is a national problem most evident in Northland, the West Coast, Otago, the Bay of Plenty, Hawkes Bay and the Waikato. In those areas the local authorities are particularly pro-development... on the West Coast the Catchment Board and the County Councils have stated publicly that the 100,000 ha of wetlands remaining in private tenure are available for drainage and development."

Tapsell notes that since December 1984 his Wildlife Service has investigated 31 applications for water rights to drain West Coast wetlands identified as habitats of note. He also considers the availability of wetland drainage subsidies as the single most important factor encouraging wetland destruction.

Ministerial support, no action

Conservationists' efforts to stop the subsidies have been supported by other Cabinet ministers.

The Minister of Finance, Roger Douglas, has noted that development subsidies sometimes encourage "a degree of development that was not justified by the underlying profitability of the investments involved. This may well have militated against the preservation of some resources such as wetlands". This view is shared by the Minister for the Environment, Russell Marshall, who stated in April last year that



Fig 1: South Island wetlands as assessed locally by catchment authorities. Key West Coast swamps (fertile, flax-covered wetlands) are named but infertile pakihī wetlands widespread in Westland are not shown. Adapted from "Wetlands, a diminishing resource," by the Environmental Council, 1983.

"the drainage subsidies at the present level do not reflect the national interest and should be removed".

In response, the Minister of Works, Fraser Colman, has said he favours the reduction of the 50 percent community drainage subsidy to a 35 percent subsidy, and the phasing out of the special West Coast subsidy over the next five years!

This five-year forewarning will guarantee a rush of drainage before the subsidy is removed. Forest and Bird has therefore renewed its efforts to halt subsidies for drainage of natural wetlands.

On its own, this removal will not achieve effective long-term wetland conservation, though it is an essential first step.

- * Government and its agencies' policy, along with regional and local authorities should recognise the importance of wetlands and the need for their protection. Wetland protection should be a matter of national importance under the Town and Country Planning Act.

- * Wetlands of national importance should all receive legal protection in accordance with the Government's election pledge.

- * Wetlands of regional and local importance should be protected. On private land, protection should be encouraged by financial incentives such as rating relief, tax credits and protection subsidies. Adequate funds should also be available for Crown purchase of such wetlands and Crown-owned wetlands should be given formal protection.

To date, ministerial expressions of concern for the plight of our dwindling wetlands have not been translated into action because of intense lobbying by groups with vested interests in wetland drainage. Meanwhile, out in the provinces, the diggers are still clanking their way through the swamps. Wetlands remain an ever diminishing resource.

Forest and Bird's Wetland Policy is available from the Society secretary on request.