

Power and responsibility

ONCE again, the Electricorp behemoth is rampaging through the corporatised landscape. Since its establishment two years ago, it has gleefully accepted its duty to be a successful business. It has been much less enthusiastic about its obligation to show a sense of social responsibility. Its decision to appeal against the Planning Tribunal's compromise on the headwaters of the Wanganui River is as regrettable as it was predictable.

The corporation, which has been diverting water from six streams to feed the Tokaanu and Waikato power stations, had appealed against a 1988 decision of the Rangitikei-Wanganui Catchment Board to reduce the volume by 32 per cent. Wanganui Maoris appealed too; they wanted to restore the full flow to their river.

The tribunal balanced the conflicting economic, social and environmental claims, and ordered a 19 per cent reduction in the draw-off from June next year. It found that power generation had enjoyed an undue advantage since the Tongariro scheme began taking the water 18 years ago. This had adversely affected natural features of the river, Maori cultural and spiritual interests associated with it, and recreation and tourism in the region.

In fixing minimum flows for the Wanganui, the tribunal emphasised protection of the water resources and the need to meet as many demands as possible so that benefits "can be enjoyed and shared by all interests to the best advantage of the nation and of the region".

That is not good enough for greedy Electricorp. Identifying the national interest with its own economic advantage, it wants all the water available — and if other people and downstream ecosystems have problems because of that, tough luck.

The corporation's myopic self-interest is transparent, but it outdoes even that by the sanctimonious way it tries to justify the appeal. The argument is not simply about dollars and cents, it says, but about "conflicting environmental values". Poor Electricorp is anguished that for every litre of water it loses — so finely balanced is the power supply that Electricorp must measure the impact in litres — it will have to burn more coal and gas to make up the shortfall. The guilt of adding to carbon dioxide in the atmosphere weighs heavily on the corporate conscience.

So it should, beginning with the fuel-burning stations it already operates. But instead of working alongside conservationists to reduce electricity consumption, and hence its emissions of carbon dioxide, it is vigorously promoting its use. It pleads the business imperative of a state-owned corporation to excuse its rejection of wider community responsibilities — unless, of course, they can be quantified to yield a commercial advantage.

That spurs it to spend large sums of public money on one appeal and then, when it does not get its way, to launch another. Its huge financial resources have become an arsenal to wear down those who challenge its single-minded power play. The public will pay again when the Conservation Department enters the lists to fight another round in the interests of the environment. That is a lamentable waste.

Finance and State-Owned Enterprises Ministers Ruth Richardson and Doug Kidd are the shareholders of Electricorp on behalf of the public. They should knock some heads together and rein in the juggernaut.



Electricity, the clean fuel? The Wanganui River upstream of the intake where it is diverted north for the Tongariro power scheme; and the downstream effect. Photo: Arthur Bates

Estimate of Electricity Conservation and Management Savings in New Zealand

Category	% Potential Savings on 1988 use
LT Heat (Low Temp Heat-Low Cost)	39
Drive (Motors)	50
Electronics	50
HT Heat (High Temperature Heat)	10
Lights	90
Feedstock (aluminium smelting)	30
LT Heat (Low temp - High Cost)	32
Total	57

Source: Electricorp