

Wild Waters at Risk

GORDON ELL reports on the case for a water conservation order to protect the Rangitata.

Canterbury's wild rivers are under increasing threat as irrigators and power generators want to take even more of their water, as the nature of agriculture changes.

Born in the snowfields of the Southern Alps, the great eastern rivers debouche onto the sunburnt plains across broad stony riverbeds. Developers see that free running water as wasted while it races

unimpeded to the sea. On the other hand, people who respect the natural world see the rivers as public domains, places for nature, for fishing and kayaking, and the essential habitats for some of our rarest bird species. They want more water left in the rivers.

Presently, Forest and Bird is joining with Fish and Game to support an application for a water conservation order to protect

The Lawrence, one of three major tributaries of the upper Rangitata River.

the Rangitata. At the same time, North Canterbury Forest and Bird has been among those trying to defend the Hurunui from proposals to dam it.

The plight of the rivers has been obvious for a long time, with developers long ago winning the right to take water from the rivers at the upper edge of the plains, both for irrigation and rural supply. The Rangitata is one such, its water abstracted since the 1940s and fed into milky-blue water races which irrigate 64,000 hectares of Mid Canterbury. Some of it is piped even, over high river terraces into the bed of a neighbouring river, the Rakaia, where electricity has been generated at Highbank since 1945.

The trouble is this historical take of water is no longer enough for modern farming. The sheep and cropping regimes which

Looking into the valley of the upper Rangitata from the north bank. Some birds depend on the broad riverbed for nesting habitat. Stilt, pied oystercatchers and banded dotterel, however, also make use of the adjacent river terraces and wet patches.

GORDON ELL, BUSH FILMS