

MAGAZINE

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A civilised spat

In South Taranaki, preservers of history and those concerned with local fish are involved in a quiet little argument. Helen Harvey reports.

Down Kaupokonui way, there is an old dairy factory. Nothing unusual in that – there are old dairy factories dotted all over Taranaki.

What sets this one apart, according to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, is the “comprehensive and complete nature of the buildings and hydro scheme”.

But according to Fish and Game New Zealand, what sets this one apart is the hydro scheme – specifically, the scheme’s weir – is a barrier to

fish migrating up and down the river.

The Historic Places Trust wants the weir preserved.

Fish and Game wants the weir removed.

It’s a 21st century dilemma: history versus ecology.

In the middle is the Taranaki Regional Council, which is opting for a fish pass to be installed to cater for the fish while keeping the integrity of the weir intact.

But nothing is ever that simple.

The Glenn Road weir in Kaupokonui first came to the attention of the regional council in the late 1990s when it was identified as a barrier to fish migration.

In its current form, the weir contravenes Taranaki’s Regional Fresh Water Plan, which states structures on or in a river should provide unrestricted passage for fish.

But while ripping the weir out seemed the obvious answer, there were a few obstacles. First, the weir was classed an orphan structure – that is, no one owned it.

Then, in about 2005, the Resource Management Act was



The Kaupokonui factory complex today.

Photo: KELLY LONEY

amended to include historic heritage. So now, heritage values have to be compared with biodiversity or fish passage values, regional council director resource management Fred McLay says.

“This is your classic resource management situation of competing values and trying to strike a deal where all those values are recognised and provided for.”

The regional council is working alongside interested stakeholders, such as Fish and Game New Zealand and the Department of Conservation, to work a deal to both achieve historic heritage protection and the fish passage, he says, and he is confident there will be a good outcome.

“We’ve been trying to drive it. We’ve been driving it pretty hard, but it’s fair to say progress has been slow.”

It wasn’t until last year that Land Information New Zealand decided the adjacent property owner, The New Zealand Rural Property Trust, owned the stream bed where the weir is located. The trust is owned by private shareholders and is based in Hawke’s Bay.

Not fish friendly: The weir at the heart of the debate between historians and ecologists.

associated buildings to the weir, because the whole context is important to the story.”

Ms Astwood’s report says the weir is a rare example of a flat-top weir. And it is the “first, and potentially, the only” weir designed and constructed by Ingledwood bridge builder and inventor Alois (Lou) Butler.

“This weir also bears witness to Butler’s ingenuity through the novel use of precast concrete vertical units in its construction.”

Based on the research, a Category I registration has been proposed for the dairy factory complex, which includes the weir.

Under the Historic Places Act (1993), places with “special or outstanding historical or cultural heritage significance or value” may be given the highest ranking of Category I status, Mrs Neill says.

“Once a final report is prepared with a recommendation, it goes to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust Board, who decide whether registration is granted or not.”

The Kaupokonui Dairy Factory complex is a reminder of the importance of the dairy industry in New Zealand since the late 19th century, she says.

“It is being considered for inclusion on New Zealand Historic Places Trust’s National Register because of its contribution to Taranaki’s history and because it retains so much of the original or early aspects from its time as a dairy factory complex.”

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Remnant of the past



The Kaupokonui dairy factory in the early days.

Photo: PUKE ARIKI

In 1935, there were “well over” 100 dairy factories in Taranaki, New Plymouth historian Ron Lambert says.

And while numerous old factories still remain, they are not in such complete condition as the one at Kaupokonui, he says, and they are disappearing all the time.

The dairy factory at Kaupokonui was built in 1897 by the Kaupokonui Cooperative Dairy Company.

The original wooden building burned down in 1910 and was replaced by a concrete building, which was up in time for the beginning of the next season in the middle of 1911.

That was the first of a number of additions over the years.

Soon after the factory was built, it had its own hydroelectric scheme.

The source of this power was the adjacent Kaupokonui River, in which Climie and Fairhall, a local engineering and surveying firm, had designed a weir and system of tunnels and channels in 1900, New Zealand Historic Places Trust researcher Karen Astwood writes in the trust’s registration report.

“This weir was a rock-filled structure which enabled water to be diverted through the tunnel and race up to the factory, and later the powerhouse, which contained the turbines necessary for completing the process.”

A new weir was built in 1941 by Ingledwood bridge builder and hedgecutter Lou Butler, after the original one was destroyed by a flood. Butler’s was made of concrete.

By 1911 the energy generated by the hydro scheme supplied the company with enough electricity to enable electric lighting in the factory and other onsite buildings, such as

the powerhouse, manager’s cottage, general store, office and stables.

“Hydroelectric capabilities were of particular importance to the Kaupokonui factory and company, as it gave them a distinct advantage over many of their competitors, at least for a couple of decades,” the report says.

In its early years, the factory relied on three five-horse teams to cart products to the railhead at Hawera, but by 1919, the company had an electric truck.

While electric vehicles weren’t that common, it wasn’t unique to Kaupokonui.

Apparently there were at least three other dairy factories in Taranaki with electric trucks. However, the Kaupokonui truck didn’t work that well because it was a “poor hill climber”.

Ms Astwood says that in 1910, the Kaupokonui Cooperative Dairy Co Ltd was “reputedly the most prolific dairy company in New Zealand, and possibly the world, with its product accounting for approximately one eighth of New Zealand’s total export of cheese in 1908”.

By the 1950s, Kaupokonui had seven major branches around the area and was a major force in the Taranaki dairy industry.

In 1963, the Kaupokonui Dairy Co amalgamated with the TL Joll cooperative to form Kiwi Dairies. In 1991, Kiwi Dairies merged with Moanui in North Taranaki. And in 2001, Kiwi Dairies merged with Waikato-based New Zealand Dairy Group to form Fonterra.

The Kaupokonui factory was still operational up until 1975. Later that year, the Pacific Natural Gut String Co Ltd began manufacturing tennis racket strings on the site.

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The factory complex also included laboratory and testing facilities, a general store, a number of residences and storage sheds, and structures associated with its hydroelectric scheme.

"The fact that so many of these original and additional features remain today adds to its heritage value and demonstrates the growth of the company as it subsumed so many of its competitors . . . Overall, the site is considered to be a strong representative example of a complete dairy complex, and the intactness of the hydro scheme and weir are important contributing factors to the bigger story this place can tell."

The Historic Places report was publicly notified earlier in the year and submissions called for.

The submission date closed at the end of May and since then the report has been internally reviewed. There were 15 submissions received, the majority of which were in favour, Mrs Neill says.

"The Historic Places Trust is taking a consultative approach in working with the regional council and other stakeholders following the submission process."

The regional council put in a submission saying it only supports the weir being registered if "fish passage is restored at the Glenn Road weir".

DOC also put in a submission requesting a fish pass. Conservation support manager Peter Morton, in Wanganui, says DOC can see both the historic and freshwater values tangled up in the site.

"What we've advocated for is trying to essentially have the cake and eat it, too - to find a way to try to ensure fish passage while retaining the historic aspect of the structure."

Fish and Game officer Allen Stancliff says his preference is for the weir to be breached to allow for the restoration of a free-flowing river, "because it's difficult to fit a fish pass to the weir that's going to provide passage for all fish species, because of the gradient and the height".

The fish pass that is proposed is a relatively short and high gradient pass.



Early technology:
The turbine that used to convert hydropower into electricity.

In effect, the fish will have to go uphill, he says.

"So straight away, that is going to restrict the passage of some species. The weir is quite low down in the catchment. I think it is only about five kilometres from the coast and 50 metres altitude."

The Kaupokonui River supports an important fishery for brown and rainbow trout, he says, but trout that move downstream over the weir during freshes and floods are unable to move back upstream.

"Trout in the lower Kaupokonui River are also unable to access the upper river for spawning purposes."

There is always a certain proportion of a trout population that wants to migrate up and down a river system and that's important for the functioning of the population, Mr Stancliff says.

The weir also affects native fish.

"Non-climbing species or species with only limited climbing ability such as inanga, smelt, torrentfish and common bully are currently being denied access to significant areas of upstream habitat."

And while a new fish pass would improve passage for climbing species, it probably wouldn't work for non-climbers, which include inanga, *Galaxias maculatus*, the most important species in the whitebait

catch in the Kaupokonui estuary, Mr Stancliff says.

"Some of the native climbing species, such as long fin eels, some of the juvenile eels will be able to climb the vertical structures of the weir or around the edges of it during rainfall, but for our interests, which are the trout fishery in the Kaupokonui, trout can go downstream over the weir in floods but can't get back up."

To restore the ability for fish to migrate freely up and down is the priority, he says.

"I guess the issue is how that's done."

A fish pass is not the best option for either trout or native fish - the existing step-wise fish pass on the weir is ineffective.

"But [a fish pass] is an option. It depends on what sort of fish pass and the cost of it. To put a low-gradient fish pass in would be more effective, but it would be a significant cost . . .

"The best option is to, in some way, breach the weir and still have the abutments or part of it there, but allow for free-flowing passage."

Fish and Game put in a submission opposing the registration of the site until the fish passage issues have been resolved. Mr Stancliff has no issue with the rest of the complex being protected, he says.

"We just feel that there are plenty of weirs in Taranaki."