

Grant from Minister recognises worth of Whangawehi work

THE award-winning Whangawehi Catchment Management Group was given an \$89,700 boost by Minister for the Environment Nick Smith when he visited Mahia on Tuesday.

Mr Smith congratulated and saluted the community-inspired restoration programme along the Whangawehi River which ultimately will see 200,000 trees planted along its riparian zone and the return of rich bird and fish life.

The community group has planted 60,000 trees since signing its first Memorandum of Understanding with the Wairoa District Council, Hawke's Bay Regional Council and tangata whenua in July, 2011.

Mr Smith visited Tuahuru Marae to learn more about the community collective which continues to grow as more landowners come on board with a third memorandum of understanding planned shortly.

Mr Smith said the group would soon learn the outcome of their application to Te Mana o Te Wai Fund which was for an even greater amount and he was confident that would provide more fuel in the tank.

He said the country had a huge challenge to lift the way it managed fresh water, describing it as a nationwide problem which could only be tackled stream by stream, river by river and lake by lake.

"I salute the work you are doing.

"You are setting a benchmark for the rest of the country and I acknowledge the huge amount of sweat, toil and co-operation needed.

"The challenge is extra-difficult with this terrain, the soils — and with the issues here, it makes it more important by the way the community has come together to tackle this challenge."

He said the Community Environmental Fund grant would provide fuel in the tank and push the project through.

"You have taken the challenge, got on with it and allowed it to be replicated."

The importance of having local land owners sheep and beef farmers Pat and Sue O'Brien, at Taharoa Station, involved was made clear as was the contagious passion and driving force of founding member Kathleen Mato.

Mr O'Brien said they wanted to be involved with the project as they believed they were just guardians of the land and were doing what "we believe is right".

"Taking out the riparian strips and wetlands is 20-25 percent of the property.

"It's the poorer grazing land and it's not going to affect our income."

"We are the guinea pigs — but where am I going to find a quarter of a million dollars to do it on my own?"

Whangawehi group chair and Wairoa District Council engineering manager Jamie Cox said understanding why the O'Briens would retire that much land was initially a challenge for him.

But he said they were now able to put 100 percent of their energy into 80 percent of their land, making it more valuable and were a great showcase to get that message across.

Mr Cox said the funding from Minister Smith was important to allow them to continue what they were doing and it was also about commitment.

"It is also about the networking and ability to connect with rest of New Zealand, crowd-funding ventures and giving people in Auckland and Wellington the ability to be involved."

The project to restore the Whangawehi awa was not just about planting, but looking after and nurturing the plants to the next stage, he said.

Keeping the motor running for the project and maintaining the community involvement along with motivating and bringing the next generation through were challenges for the group.

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— Minister for the Environment Nick Smith



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