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GEORGE HEARD/FAIRFAX NZ

The Arawhata River in remote South Westland, near the site of a proposed water export project.

It doesn’t get more rugged than this. Gloomy forest in New Zealand's rawest landscape, punched into shape over thousands of years, where the glaciers are melting and the rain seems infinite.

Deep in those forests is an ambitious project on a global scale.

An unlikely group of West Coasters have spent a quarter century ticking regulatory boxes and lining up buyers, eyes firmly on their end game – the largest bulk water export in New Zealand’s history.
GEORGE HEARD/FAIRFAX NZ

A house at the small community of Jackson Bay.

Okuru Enterprises, now trading as Alpine Pure, wants to take glacial water from a remote creek near Haast, pipe it down a mountain and through an undersea pipe, onto distant ships anchored in off the bay.

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It has permission to take and export up to 800 million litres of water per month, or nearly one trillion litres over the resource consent's lifetime.

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Neil’s beach at Jackson Bay.

When Stuff wrote about the plan last week, it was met largely with surprise: They plan to do what, exactly?
While it has largely progressed under the radar, public documents and interviews with some of those involved show the plan has traversed a rocky path and faced the highest level of government scrutiny.

Not a single drop of water has been exported. But with only a couple of hurdles left, it may just be a matter of time.

GNS SCIENCE/SUPPLIED

A seismograph on Thirsty Ridge. The Arawhata River and Jackson Bay are in the background.

BEGINNINGS

Ad Feedback

It largely began with Ian Rasmussen, a man from Haast working as a helicopter pilot.

He had deep local knowledge, and from his work high in the sky, knew a place where the water was pure and the supply infinite.

Above Tuning Fork Creek, water falls from the sky in massive deluges, settling in glacial lakes high on the mountain above the clouds.
A pipe will run under the sea and out to ships around 5.5 kilometres off-shore.

The river it feeds, the Arawhata, was carved over millennia, so filled with glacial silt that it never discolours, even after heavy rain, because the soil has been washed away.

The company's geological consultant once described the site as "wonderful and uniquely optimal" for the plan.

The idea of exporting water in bulk was still new in 1990, but slowly becoming popular, particularly on the South Island's West Coast.

Okuru Enterprises was one of the first to see the potential.

It was set up by Peter Roselli, a long-time accountant and later the Buller district's coroner. He was joined by Anthony Black, managing director of engineering contractor Geotech. That company was recently in the news; it was contracted to seal the Pike River mine.

Both men are from Westport, with strong ties to the area. They drew on other locals to join their plan.

Among them was the town's future political head, current Buller mayor Garry Howard.

Howard and his wife own nearly 2 per cent of Okuru Enterprises and have been shareholders since at least 2002, public filings show.

Documents from 1992 list Howard as the company's commercial manager.

He defended the plan on Thursday – "This is a sustainable project of minimal impact," he said – and it took place in the neighbouring Westland district, meaning his council wasn't involved.

Rounding out the group was Ian Rasmussen, who helped start it all, and his wife Helen.

They own various local businesses, including motels, a cafe, and the Haast Supermarket, and now have a greater stake in Okuru than virtually anyone else at about 18 per cent.

Despite its ambition, the project began like most do on the West Coast, Helen Rasmussen said.

"It was just how things happen on the West Coast – friends of friends and mainly based on people who had the skill and the knowledge to make it happen."

PROBLEMS
When Roselli incorporated the company in 1990, it looked like it would hit the ground running.

A few months earlier, Iraq had invaded its neighbour, Kuwait, destroying many of its desalination plants in the process.

It left Kuwait without a reliable supply of freshwater; a perfect match for a group of West Coasters with an abundance.

But the consenting process was slow.

It took four years to get the necessary sign-offs, and by the time Okuru was in a position to take water, circling buyers had gone elsewhere, no longer interested.

It became a common refrain for the project; a window of opportunity sliding shut.

"We've been very close a number of times, but for one reason or another it just hasn't happened," Helen Rasmussen said.

For the next decade, the company searched for a buyer.

It looked at the Middle East, and even Australia, discussing the idea of transporting water in giant bags dragged across the Tasman by tug boats.

At times, Okuru came close to a deal. So close, in fact, they once ordered celebratory champagne.

But it never happened.

Of the many mountains the company had to climb, the most challenging, perhaps, was a literal mountain.

While their impeccably pure glacial water was perfect, its location wasn't. It was about 500 metres within a national park.

At first, Okuru was confident it would get permission to put its dam in the Mount Aspiring National Park, despite the hurdles required to do so.

A 1990 report by Anthony Black reiterated how perfect the location was. Other sites, it seemed, had largely been dismissed.

"Despite the intake structure required in Tuning Fork Creek falling inside Aspiring National Park, the... option is pre-eminent," he wrote.

"Short term difficulties in obtaining consent must be considered over what is possibly an infinite project life.

"Do not compromise on obtaining this option."

But even then, there was public unease about industry encroaching on pristine land.

The project was estimated to cost $50 million, which had some opponents concerned about its scale and the impact it would have on the environment.

The Department of Conservation (DOC), steward of the national park, was heavily involved in the company's application and expressed concern from the start.

It believed there were "deficiencies" in the company's environmental impact assessment, DOC's then regional solicitor Evan Alty told a 1992 hearing.

Nevertheless, local authorities approved the resource consents in 1992. But one hurdle remained: Because it was in the national park, it had to be signed-off by then Conservation Minister Denis Marshall.

While he was deliberating, the United Nations (UN) got involved.

Its science and culture arm, UNESCO, got wind of Okuru's application in 1993. The national park is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Sites, one of three in New Zealand.
UNESCO was concerned that "the visual and ecological impacts of the proposed development project were not clearly known," the minutes of its 1993 meeting show.

After questioning the government, Marshall denied the application. It is unclear if UNESCO's concerns were involved in the decision.

With its perfect spot out of the picture, Okuru had to look for another spot, delaying the project even further.

It opted for the same creek but lower down the mountain, as close to the national park as possible while still remaining outside.

By 1994, it had a concession from DOC to build its pipe on the conservation estate (outside the national park), but it was too late.

An interested buyer from the Persian Gulf had gone elsewhere.

Over the following decades, Okuru didn't export a drop of water, but its project was still bubbling away; when its consents lapsed, it always successfully re-applied for them.

It began that process once again late last year, firmly dragging it back into the spotlight.

HOPES

Now in its 27th year – and still with no water exported – the company's backers are adamant water will be exported, assuming its consents are approved.

But the project has re-emerged in a different environment, where public sensitivity about water usage is at an all-time high.

"There's been a lot of anxiety expressed by various people mainly because of what happened in Ashburton," Garry Howard said.

"This is so different. It's natural rainfall going into a lake, via a river out to sea. And this is only a fraction of the water."

The Ashburton District Council's botched attempt to sell a parcel of land with resource consent to take water from aquifers beneath the town has some on high alert.

While the Okuru plan is different – no one else wants the Haast water, which otherwise flows out to sea – it would nevertheless move water overseas, when some on the other side of the Alps desperately need water.

The Ashburton plan's major opponent, Jen Branje, also opposes Okuru's plan.

"This is a community resource that's owned by all New Zealanders, coming out of a national park, and a select few are going to profit from that," she said last week.

Her petition opposing Okuru's plan has more than 8000 signatures, and is steadily rising. Of particular concern is the fact the company is using the national park's name as a selling point.

But those on the ailing West Coast, where a mining downfall and a waviering dairy industry have caused economic anxiety, see it as a light in an increasingly dark tunnel.

Helen Rasmussen, who is tangata whenua, said trading fresh water was one of the first examples of commerce on the West Coast.

The environmental impacts were no worse than installing a small town water supply, she said, and the whole point of the operation was that the area was pristine – it would damage them as well if it was spoiled.

"We're involved in the tourism industry, we've invested and believe heavily in the area, and I think we're mindful of what's available for the future.

"If you're talking clean, green, this fits that criteria I believe. If this doesn't, what else can we do on the West Coast?"
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