

## Part 2- 'Untold Stories of the Ophi River'

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### The Ophi River as an employer

South Canterbury farm business people Tony and Afsaneh Howey produce food that is consumed across the world.

Their organic blackcurrant operation ViBERi NZ Ltd has been a finalist in the New Zealand Food Awards for three years running and their vegetable/grain operation, Alpine Fresh Ltd, supplies approximately 20,000 tonnes of produce that includes potatoes to McCains, wheat to Farmers Mill, carrots to JPNZ- a juice company that largely exports to Japan, and onions to Malaysia, Indonesia and other parts of Asia and Europe annually.



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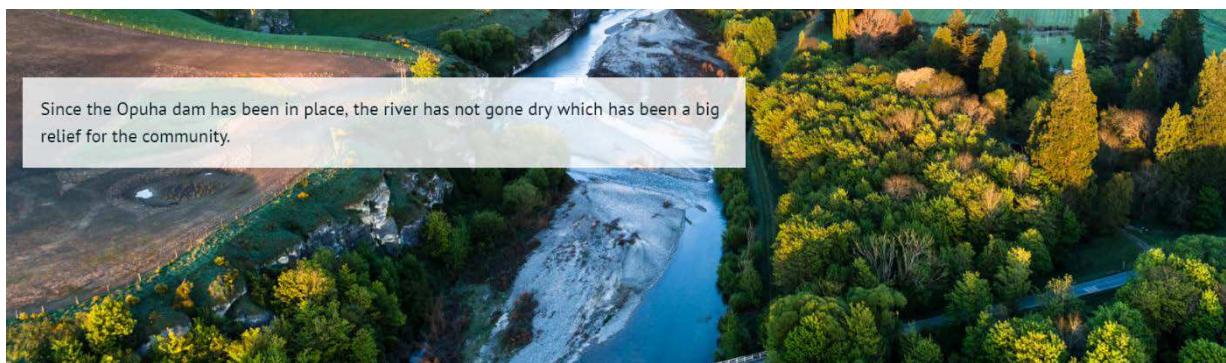
None of this would be possible without water from the Ophi River, Tony says.

“South Canterbury is the most water short catchment in Canterbury. All the water that falls on the mountains in the Tekapo area gets cut off by the Waitaki system and is allocated mostly to North Otago. The Rangitata River is the other South Canterbury river that is fed by Alpine water, but that water is mostly allocated to mid-Canterbury through the Rangitata Diversion Race (RDR) scheme, so there's a big hole in South Canterbury.”

When Tony first started farming in the area back in 1987, the biggest issue with the Opihi River was that it had no restrictions on water takes and often ran dry – leaving it an unreliable source of water for all stakeholders.

“It was bad for farmers, it was bad for the environment, and it was bad for fish. It was bad for everybody.”

As a result, the [South Canterbury Catchment Board](#) started investigating [water restrictions on the Opihi River](#).



Since the Opuha dam has been in place, the river has not gone dry which has been a big relief for the community.

“The level of restrictions being proposed meant that irrigation would have become uneconomical. It would've meant that even using irrigation for grain crops would have been marginal and for vegetable and fruit crops - it just wouldn't have been viable”

Tony and many other people submitted against the tight restrictions, and as a result they were relaxed somewhat.

“But basically the writing was on the wall. Unless there was a way of storing or harvesting water, this area would become pretty much desolate in terms of any form of farming.”

Queue the Opuha Dam- a solution that would see better and more reliable river flows into the Opihi River.



“Since Opuha has been in place, the river has not gone dry. It got very close to it the two seasons before now, but the dam had just enough water to keep the river going, so I really do believe it has been a win, win for all the community.”

Having a reliable water source in the catchment has had a direct impact on the economic growth of South Canterbury.

“One of the telling factors is when the onion factory first started up in the late 90’s, we needed 80 people so I went through WINZ and asked them to organise some staff. They just told people, anyone who wants to work at Southern Packers, show up at the WINZ office at 9am. 700 people came,” Tony says.

And yet now, they have to bring in workers from outside the district because there are not enough people locally.

“Water brings employment and growth and jobs, but it just needs to be balanced with environmental concerns to ensure we're not polluting rivers and waterways and that we're managing the environment sustainably.”

