Member's Comment

RECENT GOVERNMENT DECISIONS ON INDIGENOUS STATE FORESTS

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Just prior to the November 1978 general election, the Minister of Forests, the Hon. Venn Young, announced that he was postponing for 5 years any decision on the New Zealand Forest Service (NZFS) proposal for an 83 000 ha wilderness area in NW Nelson State Forest Park. The Minister's statement was made at an election meeting on the West Coast, but it is a decision of nationwide significance. It was the latest in a series of postponements on politically sensitive management proposals for the State forests of the West Coast. As such, the non-decision needs to be evaluated against the backdrop of polarised local-national opinion which has plagued the NZFS in its attempts to implement the revised indigenous forest policy and achieve the "balanced use" of native forests required by the 1976 amendment to the Forests Act.

This polarisation is clearest over the future management of the indigenous forests of the West Coast. In the 2½ years since the adoption of the revised policy, the West Coast saw-milling communities and local bodies have united in a diehard opposition to most forest preservation proposals put forward by the conservation movement and the NZFS (particularly the ecological reserve proposals of the Scientific Co-ordinating Committee). A brief resume of events during this period shows the failure of the government's attempts to achieve a compromise between local and national interests:

- July 1977 seminar on "West Coast forestry and the future of West Coast forest industries"; strong local opposition to reserve proposals of NZFS.

- Of the subsequent 269 submissions from the public to the Minister of Forests, most of the 157 from West Coast individuals or organisations expressed some opposition to the creation of a reserve network in the State forests.

- Local opposition to a study of the national park potential of the forests of the Punakaiki-Paparoa region.

- Shortly after the submission of the Maruia Declaration (341 000 signatures) to Parliament, a counter-petition or-

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ganised by a local group, West Coast Futures Inc., was presented (12,000 signatures) seeking full socioeconomic impact studies of the NZFS reserve proposals.

- The August 1978 West Coast Forest Policy (NZFS, 1978a) largely acceded to West Coast opinion with regard to the reserve proposals; the proposed ecological and amenity reserves were deemed to be a maximum and all other merchantable forests, at that point in time, were considered production forests. However, no firm decisions were made to gazette these reserves. An officials committee (chaired by NZFS) was set up to assess "the social, economic and environmental impact of reservation . . . in relation to the total land use pattern" (NZFS, 1978a). In particular, the committee was charged with evaluating the forestry, agricultural and mineral potential of the proposed reserves. In doing so, the government clearly favoured local opinion and refused to take any early action on the reserve proposals of the Scientific Co-ordinating Committee, or the proposals of the National Parks Authority for the incorporation of Waikukupa and southern Okarito State Forests into Westland National Park.

- On 30 November 1978 the four West Coast counties formed a United Council and, with remarkable haste, on 11 December decided to prepare a regional scheme; newspaper advertisements appeared on 18 December 1978 seeking public submissions on a regional land use policy by 2 March 1979! Anyone concerned at the national interest in the sphere of conservation of indigenous forests could be expected to be alarmed at the obvious implications of these events—the possible eventual binding of the Crown (under the Town and Country Planning Act) by local opinion (much of which is well known to be anti-preservationist) in the management of a national resource, namely, the Crown forests of the West Coast.

If the national interest is going to be served in the future management of West Coast forests it is essential that our conservation legislation, such as the Forests Act, National Parks Act, Reserves Act and the Wildlife Act, is not hampered by local obstruction through the Town and Country Planning Act.

Against this background the NZFS Nelson Conservancy invitation (June 1978) for public comment on its proposal to create a large wilderness in the Tasman Mountains in NW Nelson State Forest Park was bound to run into the same sort of opposition that had plagued the proposals for eco-
logical reserves in the beech scheme areas of the Grey/Inangahua/Maruia.

With hindsight, the NZFS probably recognises that the NW Nelson wilderness area proposal was offered to a public largely ignorant of the nature and values of wilderness. The document (NZFS, 1978b) was a bald presentation of boundaries and somewhat irrelevant maps of geology and forest types; there was no real attempt to justify the proposal on recreational/preservation grounds; nor was there any attempt to assess the socioeconomic impact, if any, of the proposal. The public reaction was very predictable, largely mirroring the response one year earlier to the NZFS proposals for the future management of the indigenous forests of the West Coast. Of the 89 submissions, 44 (mainly individuals and recreation and conservation groups) were for it and 45 (mainly local individuals, service groups, local bodies and mining interests), were against it. Government departments were divided.

In his press statement of 3 November 1978, the Minister of Forests stated:

The depth of the opposition was demonstrated by the number of individuals and small groups forwarding submissions. However, many groups showed a disappointing lack of understanding over the extent and effects of the proposals. Most of the objections revolved around the potential loss to the national economy and the West Coast economy of the resources, particularly the mineral resources, of the area. Associated with this were objections that the wilderness area would be a block in the way of the Collingwood-Karamea road with its expected boost to tourism. It was also suggested that there was inadequate justification for the proposal and that wilderness had not been shown to be the best land use for the area.

Most of these objections, except the possibility of mineral resources, do not stand up to close examination; the amount of merchantable forest is negligible and the Karamea hydro potential is downstream. The wilderness would not impinge on the Collingwood-Karamea road, if it ever eventuates. The claim of inadequate justification is fair comment.

It is this very matter of justification that is probably the most critical requirement of a wilderness preservation strategy at this time. There is no published comprehensive inventory of our rapidly diminishing wilderness resource (Molloy, 1976), either within or without the State forest system. Sadly, the NW Nelson initiative of the NZFS makes a very sorry comparison with the remarkable wilderness evaluation efforts of the U.S. Forest Service. In an associated paper (Molloy, 1979), I have enlarged upon this recently pub-
lished U.S. Forest Service inventory of 2,686 "roadless areas" with a cumulative land area of over 25 million hectares!

Another significant aspect of the Minister's announcement was the claim that during this 5-year deferral period "the Mines Department would carry out a complete mineral survey, and prepare a report on the area". Meanwhile, the area would be "managed so that the future adoption of a wilderness option is not jeopardised".

If the Mines Department does carry out a "complete mineral survey" it will certainly be an interesting development, for it is well known that it has hardly any mineral geologists. What is more likely to happen is that prospecting by private companies will be encouraged during this period; and in fact, shortly after his statement, the Minister of Forests gave his consent for Amoco Minerals Ltd to prospect an area of 4000 ha in the headwaters of the Roaring Lion Valley in the centre of the proposed wilderness area.

Prospecting by private companies will in no way constitute a thorough assessment of the mineral resources of the area; and there is a high probability that if prospecting by Amoco and any other private companies proved inconclusive the Mines Department would seek a further deferral in 5 years' time. This, after all, has been the pattern further south in the Red Mountain ultramafics in the proposed Olivine Wilderness (Molloy, 1977).

The whole heated question of prospecting such areas as the NW Nelson wilderness would be largely defused if the Minister of Mines, the Mines Department and sections of the mining industry would accept the failure of section 57 of the Mining Act 1971 as it applied to land of high value for nature conservation (national parks, reserves, forest parks, sanctuaries, etc.). With the recent 1978 amendment to the Mining Act, the government rectified the conflict in national parks (since the Minister of Lands previously refused his consent to a prospecting licence, as this could then be automatically exchanged for a mining licence if the prospect proved favourable). However, the then Minister of Mines, Mr Gair, curiously refused to accept that there should also be a "two-stage approach" (separate prospecting and mining licences) for State forest—even though it is known that the NZFS, through the Minister of Forests, sought to have the amendment extended to State forests. At the parliamentary select committee hearings on the amendment this negative viewpoint of the Minister of Mines was supported by the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (N.Z. branch) and private companies such as Gold Mines of N.Z. Ltd and Otter Minerals Exploration Ltd.
CONCLUSION

There is a very real danger, in my opinion, that New Zealand is about to witness increasing public scepticism of the value of more responsible methods of input into resource decision-making, viz. submissions to tribunals and Ministers, parliamentary select committee hearings, etc. Our whole democratic tradition will suffer if responsible opinion feels that the Executive is indecisive or listens only to the most powerful of pressure groups. The result will be increased polarisation, simplification and emotionalism, with the media featuring prominently.

There is no doubt that the NZFS has suffered loss of prestige over the NW Nelson wilderness decision. The harshest environmental critics of the NZFS have long claimed that the Forests Act is not sufficient safeguard concerning the preservation of New Zealand's forest heritage.

If the NZFS is unable to achieve any significant wilderness preservation under the Act, then it is probably inevitable that we will see much greater pressure for the formation of a type of "Nature Conservancy" with a clear preservation mandate unfettered by a multiple-use philosophy. The challenge is clear. The NZFS needs to take a much more aggressive role in promoting within the State forest system the myriad benefits to the nation of wilderness, recreation, nature conservation, etc. Further, a much greater allocation of NZFS financial and planning resources must be made to this aspect of forest management if the revised indigenous forest policy, and the recent amendments to the Forests Act, are to retain any credibility in the eyes of a watchful public.

REFERENCES