Comment

The preparation and recommendations contained in the final report were not all plain sailing, particularly with regard to the placement of the NRFA in the Fire Service Commission. The New Zealand Forest Owners' Association and the Ministry of Forestry fought hard to set up the NRFA in the Ministry. This resulted in Government delaying implementation on October 1, 1989 with the setting up of the Working Party to report to the Minister of Internal Affairs. With legislative backing it was felt that the Ministry could have done the job. The expertise will have to be transferred to the Fire Service in any case.

The Hensley report admits that the Fire Service has limited capacity to handle spreading fires in vegetation and forest, as was shown in Christchurch and Wellington in the 1988 fires.

Conditions were not easy for fire fighting in 1988 and, in my opinion, even the presence of the New Zealand Forest Service would not have made any radical difference. There was extreme danger in Ashley, Eyrewell and Balmoral Forests and that would have been the Forest Service priority. The Christchurch city area would have been outside the jurisdiction of the Forest Service. The major Dunsandel fire blew up so quickly under strong north-west conditions that no organisation could have prevented the initial spread. As in the case of almost all dangerous fires it was the change in wind and weather which enabled the fire to be brought under control. However, Forest Service experience would have been very beneficial in the areas of rapid coordination and control assistance of the Dunsandel fire particularly, but also in the Rangiora area.

A rural fire co-ordinating committee was set up in Canterbury early in 1989 following the fires. The work of this committee, as for others in the country, will be a powerful good for the prevention and control of fires in the future and especially when new legislation provides the necessary teeth.

In the final analysis a political decision has been made to place national rural fire matters in the hands of the Fire Service.

After being shunted from one department to another for three decades, Canadian forestry is once again to have a federal Department of Forestry.

The first autonomous Department of Forestry was created in 1960 but it was to become, in rapid succession, a branch of a variety of other parent organisations. In 1966 it became part of the Department of Forestry and Rural Development; in 1980, the Department of Fisheries and Forestry; was moved to the Department of Environment in 1971; and transferred to the Department of Agriculture in 1984. In 1988 it became a separate department, "Forestry Canada", operating through Orders-in-Council but early in 1990 is to become a full federal Department of Forestry under its own Act.

Mandate

The mandate of the new department will include: national leadership in the development and co-ordination of forest policy; forestry research and development; co-operation with involved organisations across a wide range of areas of forest management and protection. This reads remarkably like the functions of our own Ministry of Forestry which, according to the Minister, is about to be scrutinised by Cabinet to see if it should go out of existence.

Impetus

The Canadian impetus for the restoration of full departmental status has come from their private forestry sector, which was concerned at the lack of clear policies, especially for the sustainable management of forests. This lack was undoubtedly a result of the secondary status of forestry within other departments that had much wider responsibilities than forestry.

It is to be hoped that New Zealand forestry does not have to go on the same merry-go-round, when we already have the central Government structure that has taken Canada 30 years of trial and error to develop.

Colin Basset