The Forests Amendment Act should give us reason for some pleasure to know that this country’s long history of non-sustainable exploitation of its indigenous forest resource is over and has been replaced by a “sustainable” management regime. However, the Act is more remarkable for its negative rather than its positive achievements.

Reduction in Forest Value
Because it controls the uses that timber from the indigenous forests can be used for, it closes off management of many forest areas mainly in the hands of farmers. The local example in Otago/Southland is the Kamahi forest of the Catlins. There was no market for kamahi other than firewood and woodchips. The value of the forest to the owners is now nil. Indeed, it is a liability because they still have to pay rates and there is an ongoing requirement for possum control. Consequently farmers are now clearing the land for pasture rather than maintaining the forests or managing them. Many feel this is a regrettable last resort, but it remains the only option left open for them.

Crown Compensation
The Forest Heritage Trust is attempting to buy areas of ecological and visual significance but it has its work cut out because it cannot really be expected to pay more than the market value for the land. This is obviously a lot less than it was when the market for woodchip was available. Some of the immediate problems of land clearing may fade after the “hot heads” have made their political statement and cooled off but the longer-term problem remains. Forests considered priceless by the public have been rendered worthless to their owners. The public then expects to be able to pick and choose what they will buy on a market that they have created.

An “Unsustainable” Result
The same problem has occurred for the owners of beech forest. Their ability to even attempt to manage their forests has been severely compromised by the removal of the market for the 80% of the crop which is unsuitable for sawmilling or veneer milling. They are faced with either creaming or high grading their forest under the guise of sustainable management, or clearing the land completely.

A Dangerous Precedent?
Meanwhile the rest of the forest industry has sat and cheered from the sidelines because it is to their present advantage to do so. This could be a bad mistake because it is only a small step of the imagination to see the same pressures for “sustainable” management brought to bear on the plantation estate. The same can be said of the export controls: the controls have no place in sustainable management; they are merely political statements to buy electoral support from the most vocal of the environmental groups. The same sort of controls can be readily implemented for the plantation log export trade for very similar reasons.

The Institute of Forestry should push to see that the export controls are removed to create a more realistic market for the produce from indigenous forests and thus a market for the forests themselves. They should also be pushing to ensure that the Government now puts more research resources into the improvement of the uses of indigenous timbers that have not been traditionally used for high value end uses. If the value of the forests can be increased to the owners, then there is a greater chance of the forests being retained rather than felled and burnt, which is the only future for much of the resource.

Harold Heath
Forest Industry Consultant