Forestry growing pains

Sir,

Your February issue (Vol. 40 No. 4) was most interesting and almost makes me want to challenge J. Purey-Cust and invoke the scriptures! Just as Hamlet questioned the state of Denmark at that time I wonder if everything is OK with the state of forestry in New Zealand? I think not, but it is fascinating all the same. Is it really “greening the NZ forest industry” as noted by Peter Olsen, or perhaps the “green (backing) of the forest industry” or even the “groaning of the industry”? Never before have I heard such a lot of weeping and wailing by NZ foresters and associates. Now all of this could be a healthy sign, a sign of active debate and consideration, something perhaps to be desired. Maybe. In fact, I think what we have seen in recent issues and especially in the February one was the result of much uncertainty, confusion and division in the forestry sector.

The recent tit-for-tat exchanges between Wink Sutton and Grant Rosoman reflect rather precious positions adopted by each. On the one hand that New Zealand’s plantations were the single-handed saviours, yet biodiverse equals, of the indigenous forests. On the other that plantation forest management is ecologically bankrupt and likely to bring us all to our knees. Most sensible people know that neither of these extreme positions is true, but that somewhere in the middle is actually correct, and reasonable.

The “greening of the industry”, to which the President refers, and which is being promoted at speed by the Forest Owners Association, Ministry of Forestry and others, seems to me to be very comprehenden thing. A comprehensive view of national forestry that most countries still enjoy. Plantation forest managers by and large were satisfied to leave conservation to the Department set up to administer indigenous State forests. The latter, in turn, hasn’t yet grasped the notion that it too is in the business of forestry. It manages more forests than anyone else in New Zealand, yet plays a very small role in discussion on New Zealand’s forest policy and protocols. The NZ Forest Owners established an Accord with environmental groups, but the plantation owners it represents do not include some new overseas owners who won’t subscribe to the Forest Accord. Off to the sides, the Farm Forestry Association grows in size and stature as farmers plant more and more, mostly introduced, tree species, and an Indigenous Forest Owners association grapples with the right to harvest wood from forests of private owners. It is a surprise to me that the Ministry of Forestry, which surely has a policy and advisory role to Government, hasn’t attempted to grasp the nettle of national policy and coordination, which it is quite able to do under the Resource Management Act at least. In fact, I understood that it produced a paper for the last incoming Government, saying that this is what it intended to do.

It is possible that the Institute of Forestry could make a major effort to refocus forestry in New Zealand, if the Ministry of Forestry won’t address the issue. I am quite certain that the discrete organisations and associations presently pursuing their own specific forestry needs will grow further apart unless someone attempts a synthesis. We don’t need private forest owners following separate directions, narrow concepts of sustainable forestry in “band-aid” statutes, conservation being thought of separately from production, or state agencies talking past each other. We do need common goals and objectives, communication, understanding and direction. A comprehensive and strong national forestry policy which embraces the diversity of conservation, production, culture, use and profit is vital. Without it the forestry sector will continue to be divided and ruled, reduced to fighting within itself and mounting rearguard actions against farmers, local government, conservation groups and other detractors.

David Field
Rotorua

Sand forests

Sir,

I am researching the development of sand forestry in New Zealand, i.e. the stabilisation and afforestation of moving coastal dunes. I believe that an interesting story can be told of: (1) the early build-up of concern in New Zealand because of the encroachment onto farmland etc; (2) the adoption here of techniques developed by the French, Danes etc in the 18th and 19th centuries; (3) the efforts of first the Lands Department, then the Public Works Department and finally the Forest Service to tackle the problems; and (4) the current stage when the cutting rights of former State sand forests are held by companies. In order to make the final product read-able and to provide a truly comprehensive account, I would like to include human interest aspects, for instance anecdotes of humorous episodes and descriptions of some of the personalities involved.

If any members have a tale to tell about this distinctive facet of New Zealand forestry I would be most grateful for them to get in touch with me. Any such contributions used would, of course, be formally acknowledged.

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I have been thinking, too!

Sir,

Your February 1996 issue gave me more than usual interest through the juxtaposition of three articles. First, how good
to see Andy Kirkland’s Guest Editorial which gave positive and intelligent analysis in the usually polarised debate on the sale of State Forest assets. In particular, in a few words he encapsulated some of the real and creditable achievements of the Forest Service in its all-too-brief existence. Politicians of the day used NZFS as a whipping horse to justify reforms and sale of State assets (yes, I have been thinking too), and never gave credit where it was due. Cheers, Andy.

Equally, Ian Spellerberg’s thoughtful analysis on plantations and biodiversity was a good read. No doubt his cost-benefit table was not intended to be exhaustive, and I would add at least one further benefit of plantations to his list. This is the capacity to absorb and provide for public recreation, especially those pursuits of a nature less compatible with national parks.

While Rosoman’s 1995 article was not perfect, it did generate useful analysis on plantations and biodiversity. The Institute take it up; there are too many Institute members with job or other affiliations to make this course practicable. There is still, though, a school of thought that believes that the Institute, without lessening its independence or its objectivity, could itself launch a committee of enquiry into the pros and cons of the sale and could perhaps establish some of the relevant facts which the Government cannot, or in some cases, will not, give us.

Priestley Thomson and Lindsay Poole

MOF response

Sir,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the letter from Priestley Thomson and Lindsay Poole.

In the policy arena the Ministry of Forestry’s responsibility is very straightforward. The Ministry provides its best professional advice, consistent with its mission of working to ensure forestry makes the best possible contribution to New Zealand’s sustainable development and economic growth. Accountability is equally straightforward – our advice is available for public scrutiny.

The Ministry’s position on the sale of FCNZ was made perfectly clear in our 1993 election brief, “the sale of FCNZ needs to proceed”. That was not the Government’s position in the lead up to the 1993 election.

The New Zealand Forest Service’s performance speaks for itself. Detractors simply can’t deny what was achieved between 1919 and 1987.

I would welcome the views of the Institute, on any issue.

John Valentine
Chief Executive
Ministry of Forestry

Indigenous Forestry Consultants


Subject to sufficient interest, it is proposed that two Seminars (approx. 12 day in duration) be held, one in Rotorua and one in Christchurch, early in July.

Expressions of interest should be forwarded to:

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