Editorial change

If you see Chris Perley with a permanent grin, you have me to thank. Chris finished his three-year tenure as Editor of New Zealand Forestry in June and gleefully turned the job over to me. I think I could speak for most of the membership of the New Zealand Institute of Forestry in thanking Chris for his outstanding contributions as Editor. Since such talent is too good to leave hidden, I will expect continued contributions.

As a brief introduction to the new Editor: I coordinate and teach into the Bachelor of Commerce (Forestry) degree at Lincoln University. Originally from Canada, where I have worked in both provincial government forestry agencies and corporate forestry, I have also lived in Australia, teaching forest economics in the Forestry School at the University of Melbourne. My background is in economics and I have worked mostly in the areas of economic policy, investment and trade analysis related to forestry. Having experience as an Editor was not a key criterion for the job (and I don’t have any).

The continuity in the process of changing Editors is the Editorial Board. The Editorial Board currently consists of myself, Don Mead, John Allen, Mike Cuiddihy, and a new member, Don Hammond. This group decides the theme and content of New Zealand Forestry, but only to the extent that the membership likes them. Since this is the journal of the Institute, it is important that ideas about content, and written contributions continue to come from the wider membership.

New Sections

Having mentioned continuity, I have always been told that the point of changing people is a good time to make other changes. Readers in this issue will see new sections on education, forestry history, and international perspectives. I am assured that none of these changes are original and for good reasons they either faded away or never got started, but we will see what happens this time.

Education News is a response to the Institute’s focus on education and continuing professional development in the new membership structure. As the new membership structure is implemented later this year, NZIF members will need to be informed about opportunities for continuing professional development. The section is intended for providers of forestry education and relevant continuing professional development to keep members informed about activities in this area.

Looking back will provide an opportunity to profile articles on forestry history, and hopefully support the efforts of Forestry History Group outlined in this issue.

Studying and understanding history is important because it provides a sense of perspective about where we have been and why we are in our current state of affairs. This is particularly so for the generation now entering the forest industry whose only experience of forestry will be the form of corporate forestry that is practised today. For those who have been around longer, history is still necessary to be a reminder that much of what we propose has been suggested or tried before, and that this experience offers lessons for what we are doing now. The excerpt in this issue from a speech of McIntosh Ellis 30 years ago will perhaps serve both purposes.

International Perspectives will provide an opportunity to hear how those outside New Zealand perceive forestry in the New Zealand context and to provide contrasting views of forestry. The objective is to keep the membership informed about how the wider international community views forestry in New Zealand. An understanding of international perceptions or differences in forestry practices is important for identifying opportunities, addressing misconceptions and helping to maintain a clear picture of forestry in New Zealand.

Hugh Bigsby

Editorial

Fundamentalism to Imperialism?

The perceptions that the wider public have of forestry should be important to those who work within it, especially the public that resides in the rural areas where forestry has its most obvious impacts. After all, it is public perceptions which will ultimately influence the environment in which forestry operates.

One particular sector of the public that has had a substantial influence on forestry is agriculture. For as long as people have been keeping records, forestry has been the poor cousin of agriculture. In the competition for land, forestry has occupied only those areas which were too poor to eke out any type of existence under an agricultural system, or which were too far from markets for agriculture to be viable. This was particularly evident in the New World, where generations of settlers pushed back the forest and converted the landscape to agriculture. An important feature of this pattern of development was the creation of largely separate spheres of interest for forestry and agriculture. This separation was generated by the general perception that each had its own management characteristics and business structures, and thus separate geographic areas. Once agricultural expansion was finished, a peaceful, but separate, coexistence between forestry and agriculture emerged.

Tensions began to develop between agricultural and forestry interests as the terms of trade changed and forestry was able to compete at the margins for agricultural land. This has subsequently developed into an accelerated process of direct competition for what many in the agricultural sector would consider to be prime pastoral land. This in turn has caused a major change in the relationship between the agricultural and forestry sectors, a change which might pose difficulties in resolving.

Agricultural Fundamentalism

One way of characterising the effects that agriculture has had on forestry is to look at the criteria by which either gained the
use of land. The long period during which forests were converted to agriculture largely matched the economic and ethic environment of the time. Market conditions on the other hand in many cases it was economically prudent to convert forests to agriculture. The clearing of forests could generate capital for developing infrastructure, if the timber was milled in the process, and the income generated from agriculture was higher than that under forestry. Even where the clearing may have been economically suspect, the ethic of the time was to tame the land by conversion to agriculture and give people a place to live. The important factor for forestry during this period was that agriculture and forestry were operating in reasonably similar paradigms based on science and financial objectives. This meant that changes which were taking place, although somewhat one-sided if you like forests, were discussed and determined from a common point of view.

What could be called agricultural fundamentalism began to emerge as the agricultural sector literally began to lose ground to the forestry sector. The fundamentalism relates to a deep-rooted feeling that ‘good’ land should be used for the production of food or fibre, even though financially another land use can produce higher returns. The fibre production, of course, is heavily qualified, since it is linked to textiles or clothing, and only when it involves annual crops or animals. In other words, the fundamentalism arises from a qualitative assessment of relative importance of land use.

It is not just highest and best-use argument in which agricultural fundamentalism has affected forestry. The fundamentalism is also linked to a desire to preserve the values of the traditional farming community. Some of the more publicised reactions to forestry developments by the farming community related to the ‘last straw’ which would see the closure of some community facility if one more family left the area. The forest sector was then drawn into a social policy argument in which the Government was called on to protect the social fabric of rural communities against the largely urban forestry workforce.

This shift to agricultural fundamentalism represents an important change for forestry because it has the potential to put discussions about rural land use on the same footing as most environmental or forest-preservation debates. The change is not welcome if you come from the scientific paradigm of many forestry people. As a group, forestry is most comfortable where logical, and scientifically or financially based arguments are the most important tools for determining appropriate actions. When you get the paradigm clash inherent in agricultural fundamentalism there is the danger that there is little common ground left to resolve issues.

There is also the danger that issues will get resolved for you by other means. One of the important ways in which agricultural fundamentalism affected forestry in the past was the way in which it was to some extent codified into the Town and Country Planning Act. This legislation contained a bias which ensured that agricultural land remained in agriculture through planning tools rather than allowing the ‘market’ to influence change. There is likely some feeling that the RMA is heeding in the same direction now. Although unbiased towards any land use in the way it is written, the way the RMA is being put into practice may again pose a realistic danger that it will lean towards codification of paradigms which preserve ‘prime agricultural land’. At a recent New Zealand Agricultural Economists Association conference there was a proposal for the Association to formally approach the Government to preserve ‘prime’ farm land. Although the proposal was quickly discarded, it remains as an indicator of the paradigm shift in agriculture.

One can also encounter partial paradigm shifts in which the old rules or common ground are distorted to match the ideals of the new paradigm. One example of this is the conviction that there is something wrong with the calculations for forestry investments that would show such high returns. One suggestion floated is that forestry investments should incorporate the cost of conversion back to agriculture at the end of the rotation to capture the ‘real’ cost of shifting land out of agriculture.

While the forest sector has now gained a measure of respectability, if not acceptance, by the farming community if planting estimates are to be believed, there remains a strong suspicion of forestry in the agricultural community. The suspicion continues to feed agricultural fundamentalism. Part of the problem in breaking down agricultural fundamentalism and gaining more widespread acceptance in rural New Zealand may be that a significant part of forestry activity exists beside, but is not integrated with, agriculture, either as a land use or as part of the community. While there is a growing amount of planting by farmers on portions of their farms, there is also a substantial amount of planting that involves the complete conversion of farms to forestry. There is also not a significant community link between agriculture and forestry, since forestry employees are largely urban, while farmers remain in a rural environment. There is also not a great deal of overlap in employment with people working in both farming and forestry. Although there is potential for this to happen, the full-time nature of the work in both sectors makes this more difficult. This can be contrasted with Canada and Scandinavia, where the offsetting seasonal nature of both forestry and farming provide full-time annual income. In this case, forestry and agriculture are complementary and both become important in maintaining the rural social fabric.

Forestry Imperialism?

The question which might now be asked is how the forest sector is going to use its relative economic strength and manage its rapid growth onto former agricultural land, given the paradigm differences with agriculture? With forestry expansion in the face of the agricultural fundamentalism faced by forestry, it is not difficult to imagine the agricultural sector feeling like it was facing a form of forestry imperialism. Just listen to agricultural groups bemoaning the annoying optimism of forestry people, ruing the ‘inevitable’ tide of green surrounding them or watching forestry ventures set land prices.

While there should not have to be an apology for being a successful business, or being tempted to right the wrongs of many years as a second-class land use, the forestry sector may be well advised to avoid a superiority complex or show disdain for the effects of land-use change, no matter how inevitable they may be. An important component of creating an environment of acceptable change within the agricultural community is the creation of a basis for a common paradigm again. On one side this will mean developing and passing on forestry’s scientific and economic tools to make forestry less of a mystery. A lot has already happened in this context. One area is the commercialisation of tools like the Agroforestry Estate Model. Another is the proliferation of information on forestry from FRI, MOF and other providers like Agrifax who publish log market data along with livestock and cereal prices. Another component of the change though may be to recognise that not all values and problems are amenable to solution in the scientific paradigm. Much as forestry has made great changes in accommodating society’s environmental needs, we as a profession may have to look at how our paradigm can accommodate the structure of rural New Zealand.

Hugh Bigsby