A workshop to address the issue of implementing the ‘Significant Natural Areas’ provisions in the Resource Management Act was convened by Local Government New Zealand and Ministry for the Environment in September. The workshop enabled councillors, planners and people who are affected by the provisions, such as farmers, forestry interests and conservation groups, to share their experiences and ideas.

‘Significant Natural Areas’ are covered under section 6(c) of the Resource Management Act, and have been highlighted as a cause of concern for some councils. As councils have been working through Regional and District Plans, some of them have found difficulties in identifying Significant Natural Areas, and there have been inconsistencies in consultation and notification processes.

“The most overwhelming message was that consultation, by which I mean real consultation, which involves an opportunity to contribute to decisions in a concrete way, is crucial. If you aren’t effectively consulting, you won’t achieve community buy-in,” said Kerry Marshall, President of Local Government New Zealand.

John Hutchings, strategy leader, environmental and social, for Local Government New Zealand, said that the workshop enabled councils who have had good experiences using s.6, to pass on their practical advice and solutions to others who have yet to complete the process.

“There is a fantastic array of ‘good practice’ examples out there and it has been heartening for councils who are still going through the planning process to find that there are good role models to follow. The section is in the Act to preserve areas of particular environmental importance, and one of the messages which came from the workshop was to use good common sense when applying it,” he said.

Mr Hutchings says that the workshop focused on three main topics: ‘First we discussed what is meant by the term “significance” in the Act, and suggested practical ways of improving communications with property owners and the wider community, who may be affected by any proposed protection measure. We also looked at how, realistically, we can manage these areas without unreasonable expectations and burdens on landowners.

“People left the workshop with a clear sense of purpose – understanding what they need to do and how to go about the effective implementation of section 6c. There was a menu of options discussed and some ‘winners’ clearly identified. It’s not too late for councils to embrace ‘best practice’ and apply it. We are confident of better results in the future,” said Mr Marshall.

Forestry analyst wins Japanese language scholarship

Ministry of Forestry policy analyst Anna Keedwell left for Japan recently to start a nine-month intensive language programme at the Japanese-Language Institute, Kansai in Osaka.

Anna, from Wellington, is one of only 11 people worldwide and the only New Zealander to have been accepted for the scholarship.

This is the first time the Japanese Government has run an intensive language programme for public officials. The aim of the programme is to foster relationships between officials and their counterparts in Japan.

Ministry of Forestry Acting Chief Executive Bruce Ross said the programme is an invaluable opportunity to develop links at an informal level with Japan and other countries.

“The benefits of understanding the Japanese language, culture and society cannot be overestimated. The Kansai Institute’s acceptance of Anna into the programme will assist the Ministry of Forestry enormously in working more closely with the New Zealand and Japanese Forest Industries and providing responsive, high-quality advice to our Government,” he said.

Professor Ross said Anna’s scholarship will build on the formal links the Ministry already has with Japan at an executive level and facilitate the exchange of information between government forestry agencies in both countries.

The New Zealand forest sector has experienced a dramatic expansion in its economic relationship with Japan. Japan is New Zealand’s largest export market for forestry products and Japanese investment in timber production and processing in New Zealand has significantly increased in the last few years.

Anna’s work at the Ministry focuses on developing market access strategies for New Zealand wood products into Japan. She is increasingly in contact with Japanese forestry and government organisations.

The Japanese-Language Institute, Kansai is run by the Japan Foundation which was established by the Japanese Government in 1972 to promote international cultural exchange between Japan and other countries. The Kansai institute opened this year to meet increased needs of foreign Japanese language students. It is the Foundation’s second language institute; the first was established in Urawa in 1989. Other language courses are offered for postgraduate students and diplomats.