Alternative species - an opinion

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As part of the NZIF CPD workshops I have been running there has been an interactive session on issues for each alternative species group. Several audiences in the five locations have voiced similar themes. Some audiences were up to speed, but some reflected old information. Some of the common issues identified at the start of the workshops were:

- blackwood - hard to grow good form trees;
- all eucalypts have health problems;
- redwood has site issues;
- Douglas fir has long rotations;
- native species take too long;
- cypress get canker.

I hope at the end of the workshops the audiences were better informed on some of these issues/myths.

The latest government initiative (FIDA) has set money aside for wood design. This is still trying to make a silk purse from a sow’s ear. Radiata pine is a commodity product which can be tared up, and is developing new exciting markets, but I would suggest that it is the country’s long term interest to invest in bringing other species into production forestry. These thoughts are echoed by the majority of respondents to a recent survey of users of alternative species - architects, sawmillers and retailers - who strongly support the development of other species. They want a consistent supply of quality alternative species to provide options for their industries.

I believe that the New Zealand forest industry is developing a mind set of marketing other species “as too hard, therefore not worth trying”. Currently we have a eucalypt market for pulp in the CNI, so pruned ash group sawlogs and durable eucalypts have been chipped. It is no coincidence that 60% of eucalypt sawn in New Zealand is sawn in Northland, reflecting the interest and commitment to utilising the local resource.

New Zealand currently imports $21 million worth of sawn hardwood timber but we struggle to develop our own hardwood timber industry. We also import $25 million of sawn softwood timber (mostly western red cedar), so a market exists for stable and durable softwoods. As Wink Sutton used to say “I like carrots, but I have other vegetables in my garden”. When will the New Zealand forest industry say “we are aiming to have radiata pine and other species, not radiata pine or other species”? I believe that day should come sooner rather than later.

At the end of each workshop I have provided a brief summary of my own opinion on where I consider the species genera fit into the New Zealand forestry scene:

**Douglas fir**

Clearly it is still the second most important plantation species in New Zealand although in the long term it faces competition from cypressess as the appearance market.

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Photo 1: Macrocarpa clones near Balclutha. The challenge with cypressess is matching species to site in order to minimise the threat of canker. New breeds need development.

devlops for these species. It is well suited as an alternative to radiata pine on many South Island sites because of climate and landscape. It is limited to cooler sites in the North Island. With improved seed sources there are opportunities to develop stronger market niches.

Cypresses

They are poised to be the third most important genus in New Zealand. Cypresses already have market acceptance

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with a strong demand for quality. Key challenges are matching species to site in order to minimise the threat of canker. Related to this, new breeds need development.

**Redwood**

Redwood has a strong market niche in California as well as a good domestic market in New Zealand. Care must be taken to ensure that enthusiasm to plant redwoods does not override careful siting. There is uncertainty about silviculture and the potential of clones. The natural durability of New Zealand redwood also needs confirmation.

**Natives (plantation)**

Natives will grow in acceptance as suitable plantation species with time and warrant serious consideration for forestry. Although they struggle in economic terms they have other tangible benefits.

**Acacia melanoxylon**

Blackwood occupies a market niche and has potential in both domestic and export markets. A resource has been established and silviculture is understood. The economics of growing this species are improving with a stronger market.

**Eucalyptus nitens**

Currently it only has a pulp market but there is potential for solid wood and veneer, the latter for use in LVL as well as appearance grades. It has a health risk and is suitable for cool/cold sites only. A priority is genetic selection for better wood properties.

**Eucalyptus fastigata**

It is sold on the domestic pulp market but it has a strong solid wood future because of its strength and appearance. *Eucalyptus fastigata* has a lower health risk and wider site tolerance (except very cold sites) than *Eucalyptus nitens*. It is the current “best bet” eucalypt for New Zealand.

**Stringybark eucalypts**

The stringybarks have better sawing and drying characteristics than other eucalypts. They have desirable strength, appearance and durability properties. Like all eucalypts there is a health risk They have potential for posts (round and sawn) particularly as CCA treatment of other species declines. Matching species and site is important.

**Other species-Timber/markets**

Niche species have a role:
- Black walnut with seed source and siting offers promise on microsites.
- Oak is a classical timber missing from New Zealand forestry.
- Paulownia has a niche market in Japan, an uncertain domestic market, and a possible Australian market. Siting is super-critical.

**Other species-Specialty sites**

Species for special sites include:
- Poplar, struggles in the market, but has been relied on by farmers as a soft forestry option.
- Conifers for the South Island high country; e.g. Corsican pine.

**Conclusion**

Alternative species have a role to play in New Zealand forestry. Alternative species involve some risk and the key factors for success in growing them are commitment, homework and recognition of the differences to radiata pine forestry. However, the decision to plant them can be supported by economics and other contributing factors such as market, biological and landscape diversification. New Zealand forestry would be in a stronger position by reducing imports, creating more jobs, improving public support and be more interesting if there was a better balance between pine and other species.