

Swan-song from John

Christmas time and writer's block, but not entirely. The weather is foul, when it isn't raining its blowing a gale, the hail took all the leaves off my strawberry plants and the north-west wind burnt the spuds worse than the unexpected frost a month earlier. Plenty of time to write something with nothing else to do, but it doesn't seem to work like that - too many jobs undone to worry about and the stream of consciousness remains a muddy trickle like an unfenced creek on a dairy farm. A fine sunny day is best for writing, and we just haven't had many so far, and that, Mr Editor, is my excuse.

One relief of course is an empty mail box and newspapers from the end of the road too sodden to read. Also missing are those farming freebies (five or six), lovingly detailing the latest assault on the land, from irrigation schemes seemingly dreamed up by children in a sandpit to 'spray and pray' followed by 'hoof and tooth' which means that there is no land at all which can't be whacked regardless of the downstream consequences which you and I must pay for... .

Still, I must remember that it was the front page picture in one of them at the height of the dairy boom, of a Canterbury neanderthal under the headline "First thing we do is rip out all the trees", that spurred me to take interest in this in many ways benighted profession of dairy farming, and to get on to the local Fish and Game council - at the time water and mud were bigger issues down here than forest conversion, though the ripping out of shelter still causes worry.

I must also remember that sometimes there is also something there of value to people with more than a forestry interest, of which the leader by a country mile are the weekly articles in 'Country-Wide' written by the farm forester Denis Hocking. I would subscribe for them alone if I didn't get the magazine free, and it is no criticism of them to say that they stand totally alone in the current literature of New Zealand forestry. How do we spread them further, particularly to the forestry profession?

Industry foresters may grunt something about dabbling amateurs but they couldn't be more mistaken. Denis' articles are state of the art, down to earth, topical and easy to read, a view from outside, but where would we put them (Denis agreeing of course)? Forestry periodicals such as the 'Journal of Forestry' and Farm Forestry's 'Tree Grower' come out quarterly, too infrequently, so perhaps a Christmas anthology? Then there are the weekly newsletters, 'Friday Offcuts' (FIEA) and our own Institute one. They could with benefit fit in to both.

Friday Offcuts has a heavy Australian content, mostly to do with can-do things like the next world conference on saw sharpening, and it also suffers, again in the Australian context, from green phobia, something which New Zealand forestry (but not our agriculture) seems to have grown out

of. The NZIF newsletter has evolved into a useful calendar of events and record of Institute activities, but has difficulty promoting discussion. Both need lightening up.

Having spent the year castigating the forest industry for this and that, chiefly a lack of enterprise in pursuing new uses for wood as conventional ones fade, and falling by the wayside into the non-think of log export, it is nice to find that at least in the South some forestry things go well and not all is gloom.

This year the Farm Forestry Conference will be held down here (April, www.nzffa.org.nz) and information unearthed in the course of setting the programme has thrown up some interesting unreported things. Switching horses here to that other organisation, we spend the first day looking at silver beech management and utilisation in Western Southland. That was the indigenous field day trip for the 1998 NZFFA Southland conference, and how different to now.

Then the Silver beech (*N menziesii*) regeneration had just passed into the hands of the Waitutu Incorporation, and what would they do with it, these people ignorant in forestry? Some 12 years later we will see a forest professionally managed under a single stem selection system, unique I suspect in New Zealand, and sophisticated milling into a wide range of products. The forest remains, one of New Zealand's best timbers remains in use (and that much less unsustainably logged wood is imported), and the owners gain profit from their lands. Not all inevitably goes down hill.

Euc nitens wood chips from a Japanese owned consortium boom, and in this most monocultural of forests we heard a falcon calling when we visited. It liked the cutovers it seems. A casual conversation with an employee of a local MDF plant, recently changed from American ownership to Korean, elicited the response that production was going flat out, that the new owners were a refreshing change to work for, and that life was what it ought to be, a box of birds. On top of that, a local forestry company is getting seriously into forest fungae. If you want to see where that began, read the proceedings of the 1996 NZIF conference in Southland.

As they say - good things take time.

John Purey-Cust

John is a fellow of the NZIF, a full member from Southland, and winner of the 2009 South Island Husqvarna Farm Forester of the Year Award. This is John's final column. We hope that Denis Hocking will be able to contribute to subsequent editions.

