

Not the last word for forest policy

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Two years ago, I suggested New Zealand has a greater need for a national forest policy now than at any time since the 1913 Royal Commission on Forestry (NZJF, 58(1), May 2013). I haven't changed that view, which is why I agreed to be part of the NZIF-initiated forest policy project.

Forest policy is not something people usually get excited about, and those of us on the organising committee for the NZIF conference at Te Papa on 10 August were pretty nervous about having the policy project as the topic. How would we attract enough people to cover the cost of the venue? Could just four working party reports plus open discussion fill the day? Consequently I was relieved and excited when the conference opened with over 100 people present, all of whom had clearly come wanting to support the project and be involved in the discussion.

It was also encouraging to see changes in people's understanding of the project and in their personal views as the day progressed. This was summed up elegantly by Peter Clark:

My initial reaction was that with enhancements to the Resource Management Act, the new National Environmental Standard (NES) for Plantation Forestry and the National Policy Statement on Freshwater we would not need a National Forest Policy. But as the debate developed during the day it became increasingly evident that these alone are unlikely to deliver the full benefits forests can offer. With a National Forestry Policy we have the opportunity to better align private land use, forest management and investment decisions with what is optimal for society well into the future.

(Clarky's Comment, PF Olsen's newsletter Wood Matters – Issue 78, August 2015)

I am still concerned about the breadth of understanding of what a forest policy should cover. Many of those present talked in terms of a 'forest industry' policy not a forest policy. In my dictionary, industry is 'a branch of trade or manufacture' so forest industry really relates only to commercial forests – and probably those producing wood products. If we confine the policy to plantation forests and processing we should wonder why it is not produced by Woodco.

Another interesting comment was 'what our kids do is not what was available to us, so how can we develop a policy for the next 50 or 100 years?' But when I was my kids' (even grandkids') age, we had forests that provided all sorts of benefits to New Zealanders. Sure, we didn't have MDF or LVL or wood plastics, but we had biodiversity (we didn't call it that), we had clean water, we had erosion protection, we had recreation, we had building materials, we had packaging materials, and although we mightn't have understood the significance, the forests were soaking up and storing carbon. A forest policy is about making

sure the generations that follow us have the opportunities we have had to benefit from New Zealand's forests.

Those involved with commercial forests and wood products may restrict their focus to policy that provides the best environment for their activity (favourable tax, high carbon price, better regulations, etc). Many of our commercial forests are owned by non-New Zealand entities who are primarily concerned with what their shareholders and investors want. This may not be the same as what New Zealanders want. A national forest policy must focus first on what the country wants from forests. This includes making sure there will be forests for our children and grandchildren to provide the sorts of things forests provided for us including opportunities for new products. This is not about locking up forests, but about making them work best for New Zealand. But the policy must also consider how to attract investment in New Zealand forests and facilities for processing and using the products from forests. The task is then how to join these two objectives together.

The recent World Forestry Congress in South Africa looked at the breadth of activity associated with forests. The Congress theme was *Forests and People: Investing in a Sustainable Future* and there were six sub-themes:

- Forests for socio-economic development and food security
- Building resilience with forests
- Integrating forests and other land uses
- Encouraging product innovation and sustainable trade
- Monitoring forests for better decision making
- Improving governance by building capacity.

Comments at the NZIF conference suggest empathy with the Congress's themes such as:

- The presentations were 'too tech' focused
- Look forward to what might be possible in the future, not focus on the present
- Cover all forests, not just radiata
- Be positive not negative
- Involve Maori and environmental groups
- Social impacts are important
- Farmers are part of the solution
- Get beyond 2°C – include adaptability and resilience.

One delegate congratulated the policy team on its progress based on voluntary effort. We must ensure the conference was not 'the last word' on the topic.

Andrew McEwen is a Registered Forester and Past-President of the NZIF. For more information on the World Forestry Congress sub-themes see www.fao.org/about/meetings/world-forestry-congress/programme/thematic-focus/en/

