

Where to for Wood Councils?

Erica Kinder

What is a Wood Council?

This is a question I have answered many times in the last 12 months since I took over the role as CEO for the Southern North Island Wood Council. This question is usually followed quickly with the next, 'So what do you do?' I'm sure in our esteemed forestry circles I do not need to give the long answer to these questions, but I will provide the short one.

What is a Wood Council? There are five Wood Councils based around New Zealand, and the geographical areas they cover seem to roughly align with the old Forest Service boundaries of Northland, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay, Southern North Island, Marlborough/Nelson and Southland. The Marlborough Forest Industry Association is the oldest Wood Council, formed in 1971.

The Councils in no way cover all of New Zealand, and a glaring omission is that there are none in the Rotorua and Canterbury districts. All Councils have been formed and funded entirely by their own members from the forestry sector. We are all non-profit entities, and the purpose is entirely for 'industry good' activities, promotion and representation at local council or government level, and communication.

Each Council has a board that is voted from within its membership and they provide the direction and leadership for each Council. Wood Councils conduct their own activities based on what the members want in that region, and some are run by volunteers from within the membership. Others, such as ours, have employed a coordinator.



Careers Day stall and learning on a machine driving simulator

Southern North Island Wood Council

The Southern North Island Wood Council, geographically speaking, is the largest. We cover the entire bottom of the North Island, as far north as Ohakune, across to Waipukurau and down to Wellington. This makes our membership diverse, and also means a lot of travel for our board members to get to quarterly meetings.

We have members that include ports, sawmills, logging contractors, cartage contractors, forestry companies, forestry investment companies, forestry consultants and a seedling nursery. The NZ Farm Forestry Association is also a member of our Council, and I have enjoyed meeting their associates and attending a field day held in the Wairarapa this year.

What do I do? Well, that depends, is the answer. It depends on what our board places the most emphasis on for that year. At the moment that is a heavy dose of careers and training promotion, followed with a sprinkling of keeping up with local council policies, and a touch of organising our yearly training awards, along with the distribution of information from all the other associated groups in our industry.

Careers and training emphasis

The emphasis on careers and training promotion is for two main reasons, the first being that as we all know we are in a labour shortage for our sector. All of our members are struggling to hire qualified or, in some cases, just drug-free staff. This is a recurring theme at all our meetings, and by putting our resources into attracting and retaining staff we are actually reaching a large part of society who do not even seem to know we exist.

In the Palmerston North area, for instance, schools didn't even know that forestry was an industry in their region. I believe that by reaching out to schools and local employment groups we are actually reaching a whole wider part of the community. Parents, teachers and other local businesses are all made aware of 'the forest sector' and all that we have to offer. So far, I have been overwhelmed with the response to the point where the Southern North Island Wood Council has now also hired two regional coordinators based in Palmerston North and Taranaki to solely focus on the interaction with schools.

Second, it seems our industry has been very bad at promoting itself. I am not sure why. We seem to have all the key elements that would make for a great story: a growing industry, carbon storage (in an economy that has promised carbon neutrality), excellent rates of pay, diverse jobs to suit most skill sets, profitable businesses and a levy-funded nationwide organisation. There is also no shortage of associated groups all 'representing' our industry. The power point presentations are positively jostling with logos.

However, these elements have just not combined to produce the results our members want. There is no

strategic and coordinated nationwide campaign that is current and attractive to new job entrants, and there is not enough communication in a modern way – only fragments of this that seem last minute and not what the market requires. So our Wood Council is attempting to fill a gap. I have seen some great online campaigns run by our forestry friends in the UK, the US and Canada, and I believe we have a lot to learn in providing open days, free events, local workshops and community-based projects.

Luckily, I have a background to suit this task. I grew up on a sheep farm in the Marlborough Sounds, I am a Forestry Science graduate from the School of Forestry at Canterbury University, and have worked across many areas of our industry, running log yards, loading ships and truck dispatching.

I am also married to a forester. We own plantation forests in their third rotation and have just completed logging some of it. Also, I have children currently suffering the careers departments at secondary school and trying to figure out what they want to do in life with very little guidance from their schools. Furthermore, I spent six years at Beef + Lamb NZ, coordinating regional events for farmers where true community spirit seems to live.

Women and Māori in forestry

Also, and some of you may have noticed this, I am a woman. This has always been, and I am not going to sugar coat this, a bit of a hindrance in the forestry sector. An example of this was having to interview and hire my (male) replacement and observing his salary package was double to my own. There is hope in this area, as there are many young women coming through now into our industry who simply will not put up with that and I can see a future where gender really won't matter.

I think our industry is starting to recognise this, especially with the latest round of scholarships offered from the Ministry for Primary Industries that are for women or Māori only to enter forestry-based tertiary training. (I'm still not sure how to take these scholarships. Are they recognition that these groups are not well represented, or are they hinting that somehow the only way these groups are going to get there is with incentives? By asking for equality, how are we gaining it, if only with such initiatives?)

Workplace danger

Some of the jobs I have had in the past have been in extremely dangerous workplaces. I know forestry suffers from a taint, particularly the fear of parents, of being a dangerous place to work. Stevedoring, or the loading of ships at wharf side, would have to be the most dangerous thing I have ever done. We had two workplace deaths, one that I witnessed, in the 10 years I was in this career, and many injuries and near misses. Too many to count.



Guy Farman from Farman Turkington Forestry shows students how to fly a drone

I myself was run over by a log loader, but it turns out that if you lie on the ground flat then the wheel base is high enough to run over you untouched. In this instance, the driver was reading paperwork on his lap and not looking ahead. If parents or students mention concerns about safety, they are completely valid to me. When you are the only woman in a workplace, you often have to provide support and sympathy to injured co-workers.

However, all workplaces are dangerous to differing degrees in my opinion. Try the mental stress of an office job in a big city, commuting in traffic, dealing with 'workplace bullying', sitting in an air-conditioned room all day, staring out the window. I would still take the fresh air, sunrises, frost on the ground and the simple physical activity of working outside any time.

Do we all want to live forever? Or does it just feel that way sometimes? You are still more likely to be in car crash driving to get a pie than get an injury in a forestry-based job. What about driving to get a pie on the way to a stevedoring shift? What is that statistic?

For our members, it is the perfect storm of just enough knowledge and ideals to make for a frustratingly determined CEO.

Wood Councils essential

I believe, and this is just my personal and obviously biased opinion, that Wood Councils are essential in

New Zealand. We are the regional voice for our sector providing a non-competitive platform for many discussions, and dedicating time and energy into areas that many of our members support but just do not have the time outside their day jobs to contribute to.

I am amazed that some of our members will drive four-and-a-half hours to attend a board meeting, eat a dry sandwich, and head home again, talking into their bluetooth speakers in their utes the whole way. Their dedication to industry good and a hope for the future of their workplaces is incredible, and this is what the Wood Councils are for – they are a direct link into our industry.

Career Expo's

I have also particularly enjoyed the interaction with young people this year at schools where I have held informal talks about 'forestry stuff' and at Careers Expo's where I have set up stalls and roped in some industry staff for the day to help out. Starting with zero in the way of banners or brochures, I have made my own, changed them, and am rethinking my approach all the time.

I think I have learnt as much from the students as they have learnt from me. First, around communication, I know we see young people wandering around with phones all the time but it turns out they love to talk. To read – not so much. I try and catch someone's eye, ask about what they are interested in, and then turn that into something they could use in our forest sector.

If a student is into computer systems, I ask them if they have heard about GIS and its applications with drones for forest mapping. If they like engineering subjects, I ask them if they know about soil stability and water movement in forest roading. Into economics? Then I ask if they have heard about forest investments, rates of return on different land uses and the marketing of logs overseas. There is no subject that a secondary school student is doing that does not relate to forestry somehow, except maybe sewing (that one stumped me) and sports studies.

Value of social media

What I have learned from these interactions can be brewed down pretty simply. Either we need to communicate face-to-face or with video. It is the only way forward if we want to promote ourselves with students, because if we cannot actually be there in person then we need to be there digitally. Emails, websites, booklets, brochures – all these we are doing to communicate with parents and teachers.

The only way to get videos seen is through social media and this is a huge, vague thing for most people over the age of 40. There are many different forms of

social media, with Facebook being the largest (and the least used) by anyone under the age of 30. Increasingly popular now is YouTube, where a person or 'blogger' has a following, and I see some real promise with this approach. The trouble is we need a 'celebrity forester' or an 'All Black forester' to generate any real star power, and I am not sure that person is out there yet.

Another personal notion of mine would be a 'forestry mascot' for our vision. 'Bring back Bogor!' We need a relatable face for our industry, and while the pot-smoking hedgehog might not be PC these days, we still need a version of this. Someone recognisable and non-threatening for our campaigns. Maybe I will try a life-sized cut-out of this at our next Careers Day and let you know (perhaps we need a nationwide competition to develop a new mascot?).

One of the first tasks I set myself with the Southern North Island Wood Council was setting up a Facebook page, and then really starting to use it. I did search around but found very few other pages in New Zealand forestry at all, so I make my own videos, slide shows and posts, and share relevant newspaper articles and posts from other groups. There has started to be some real interaction, and it is great to be able to tell young



Forest interns from Makoura College in Masterton

people to look at our page, as I have found very few are interested in a website because they are just not interactive enough. We also have good success with our Instagram page and YouTube channel.

Intern Programme

Another initiative our Council started last year was the Intern Programme. Essentially this was a school holiday work experience scheme, but the difference was we paid our students for a week of their time. Over that week we got them to video and photograph their involvement in differing forestry workplaces. We chose two Year 9 students from Makoura College in Masterton and they visited five workplaces over a week, which included a day in a log truck, a visit to see log scaling and ship loading with C3 at Centre Port in Wellington, drone flying, quad bike riding in the forest, and laying out road lines.

At the end of the week they produced a video that our Wood Council has used for promotion and at other schools to explain how interesting the varied jobs can be. We have received great feedback from the local secondary schools around this scheme and this year we are rolling out the Intern Programme over three of our districts. We will have to handpick students as I think the word is out.

Big Day Out forestry field trips

Other projects for our careers promotion this year include three Big Day Out forestry field trips that we will be holding across our regions. This will involve all our members, and speakers will be required as well for full-day bus trips to visit sawmills, nurseries, log yards and logging sites.

Of high importance for city-based students is a picnic lunch in the forest with a biodiversity talk. Often many of these students would never have had the opportunity to sit in a forest and observe their surroundings. We are also planning a silviculture element to these trips, where students can have a go at pruning trees so they can understand why we do it. With our two new coordinators and myself, the only limit on these trips is the number of buses we can take.

Forestry training providers

I feel that some of these ideas have started to produce results, along with the extensive media coverage that forestry has had in the last year. The University of Canterbury's School of Forestry has received its largest intake for many years with 33 students enrolled from all over New Zealand. At Toi Ohomai in Rotorua, their machine driving courses are consistently filling, and we are now having to find workplaces to accommodate the students coming out of this course.

It is a large drain on a contractor to take on a young and only semi-trained individual when there is a high chance they will jump ship for an extra 50 cents as soon as they are qualified. But they do it anyway, and so far



Student on lunch break in forest

(as there are very few subsidies in place to help with this) all the risk and financial disadvantage has been with the contractors.

More events to come

I know that all our Wood Councils have many differing activities and projects that they are working on around New Zealand, and it is very refreshing to see such support from all our companies and associated groups. If anyone wishes to know more about what your Wood Council is doing, or wants to contribute, please get in touch with your local representative because I know they will be very happy to answer any questions.

I have thoroughly enjoyed the last year with the Southern North Island Wood Council, and as we have many plans and events in place I know they will keep me busy.

Next week we are off to park a fully loaded log truck in The Square in Palmerston North for the Hilux Rural Games and hold an information stall to prove that there is forestry in the region!

Erica Kinder is CEO of the Southern Wood Council based in Masterton. Email: sniwoodcouncil@gmail.com.