

FORESTRY FOR FARMERS: WHO SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE?

J. R. PUREY-CUST

Neil Barr's articles in the *New Zealand Farmer* make good and provocative reading, and his recent comments (*New Zealand Farmer*, 103(6): 80-3, March 25 1982) on the Forest Service's advisory service is a good example of what we have come to expect from him. Briefly, he argues that advisers trained in conventional plantation forestry have too many blockages built in by their background to be able to give unbiased and professional advice to the farmer who wants to do something different, particularly the man who is interested in grazing under the trees.

The gut reaction of many foresters is probably to say to hell with the sheep, and to reject the interest as just another example of the greedy cocky trying to worm his way back under the fence after an unused blade of grass. Most forestry people have been reared in an atmosphere that ascribes to them a lowly place on the land-use social scale. They are used to picking up the pieces that farmers can see no use for, or that have been wrecked by mindless agricultural optimism, and they see their single-purpose occupation as a higher stage in the evolution of land-use practice in New Zealand than stock farming. They note the cries of anguish that arise on all sides when trees creep back on to even a tiny proportion of the country. So it is possible that, psychologically, the forester is not conditioned to be more than mildly interested.

But psychological doubts and uncertainties are the attribute of the defensive party, which at the moment forestry, with so much going its way, should not be. There is the environmental interest in native forests, disconcerting at times but none-the-less an interest in trees that was not there before. Give it time to mature. Corporate forestry (State and otherwise) is booming. Farm forestry is no longer seen by other farmers as an abode of cranks and eccentrics, but something that many wish they had taken an interest in long ago. It may well be that this interest is expressing itself in more demanding and unconventional ways than we are used to. The original farm foresters were enthusiasts who frequently did not need advice anyway, indeed rather the reverse, and Neil Barr would be a prime example.

But before we are too critical, we must take heed of another factor peculiar to the growing of trees, and that is the taxation system that applies to them. In every other enterprise in production from the land, the grower is entitled to offset the costs of the enterprise against income from his other farming activities. Sometimes in addition he gets a subsidy or some other form of encouragement as well.

Trees get none of this on the farm though there has been recently some concession to those landowners who operate as a company. For many years the concession to tree growing by the tax gatherer has been through the forestry grant and loan scheme. Essentially the grant scheme allows for the payment back to the farm forester of approximately 50% of his management expenses, provided he works to a plan of management approved by the Forest Service and subject to inspection of the completed work.

Some would argue that this is in fact a good buy for the farmer since it is considerably more of a rebate than most would get through their income tax, and to some extent it is. But it is a normal concession subject to abnormal controls, and for a long time (though to a slightly lesser extent now) subject to very rigid definitions as to what would qualify for approval. Inevitably that has meant plantation radiata pine. There are signs that these strictures are easing; other species are approved provided they have some productive potential and can satisfy the call of the Treasury for a 10% return. That will call for some fuzzy figures at times and certainly it will rule out indigenous trees. It will also be very difficult to justify new thinking, of the sort that Neil Barr proposes, for lack of proven example. Anyway, regardless of detail, it is a negative, controlling and bureaucratic system.

We simply do not have a forestry tradition in this country. Trees are held at worst to be a nuisance that cost money to remove, and at best something that may provide enough cash to pay for the change of land use. The time when we start applying the same quizzical eye to agricultural investment is close but it has not yet come, and the delay in its arrival has been assisted by the forestry grant scheme, with its inbuilt compartmentalisation of forestry as a special situation needing special attention.

There may well be a surge of interest in farm forestry now, as the more far-seeing farmers look to the options open to them and wonder why they ignored the third (of meat, wool and trees)

for so long. But interest will not turn to action on an appreciable scale until there is more freedom of action and more visible encouragement. At the moment Forest Service extension officers do spend an inordinate proportion of their time on routine administrative work, much of it in the office. They have little time for selling forestry or for innovative thinking, and in the end this reflects on the priority accorded to advisory work by the Service in general. Experience in it is not seen as "relevant" when promotion to other duties is under discussion, positions are not highly graded, training in the all-important arts of communication is minimal, and expenditure on publicity and educative material very little.

Research is being done, but research flows to the field by osmosis through constant contact with the scientist. He in turn gets back the hints of direction that keep him on the right track. In corporate forestry, the web is there, even if it is fashionable to lament field ignorance of research findings. In farm forestry the links are not there and the information does not move to and fro.

This situation has to be rectified both because farmers own a great deal of land that would be better off in trees (as they would be too) and because we cannot go on for ever regarding farming and forestry as opposite and alien power blocks. We have to intermesh if only for the sake of social harmony, and to do so we need a positive encouragement of tree planting in the farming sector, and of the evolution of ideas too. That means that everybody, the Director-General of Forests, the Treasury, the Collector of Taxes, Federated Farmers, local authorities, has to work out a way of encouraging farm forestry, instead of as at present contenting themselves by saying that they are not against it. They must be for it.

So maybe Neil Barr's contention that forestry advice should be a responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture is not such a bad one. Their advisers are well trained in getting a message across, and the forestry message is not a particularly difficult one. Why don't we look at the idea a bit harder — or come up with a better alternative?