

LETTERS

Control pollinated seed price

Sir,

Adrian Ford, President of the Forest Nursery Growers Association, covers a lot of ground in his article titled "Proseed's Future" in the last issue of New Zealand Forestry.

I am most interested in how Mr Ford would assess the value of control pollinated (CP) *Pinus radiata* seed. Although he does not state it, Mr Ford implies that the prices paid by individuals and companies who secured part of the 20 kg sold by tender were unrealistic.

As Mr Ford points out, forest growers are recognising the advantages of planting genetically improved stock and are prepared to pay for it. A quick survey around several private nurseries indicates that, if you were early enough, you may have been able to secure GF 25 cuttings for planting this winter but you had to be prepared to pay anything between \$400 and \$675 per thousand. Are foresters going silly? Can an improvement of 8 GF points justify paying a premium of between \$250 and \$425? The FRI publication "What's New in Forest Research No. 157 - Which *radiata* pine seed should you use?" indicates that GF 23 stock will give about 10% improvement in volume over GF 16 stock. In addition to this, there will also be an improvement in tree form. Providing you are doing everything else right, for an additional investment of between \$166 and \$280 per hectare (assuming a planting stocking of 666 stems per hectare) you might expect another 60 or 70 cubic metres of wood at clearfall. Paying the premium for the higher quality planting stock is probably good business, especially if you think form gains are going to result in much of the additional volume being in the better log grades.

As has been pointed out, if you haven't secured your elite cuttings for this winter's planting you're probably out of luck. With the current interest in forest planting, and recognition of the fact that most of the new planting is currently occurring outside of the major corporates, private nurserymen can look to better times over the next few years than they endured through the late eighties. If there is a surplus of nursery stock you can be pretty sure that nobody is going to be ploughing in elite cuttings.

So what is this CP seed really worth? In 1991 Proseed had a catalogue price of \$2600 per kilo for GF 25 seed. I suggest that a nurseryman who was confident of his ability to grow cuttings might have been happy to pay twice the 1991 catalogue price for GF 25 seed last October if he had known that was what was necessary to have secured seed. Recovering his seed costs over a three-year stool bed programme he could have anticipated producing cuttings at an all up growing cost of about half of what he could sell these cuttings for at today's prices. Of course growing cuttings is more demanding than growing seedlings, but even in a bad year when a cuttings strike rate in the nursery fell to say 30% the nurseryman could still expect to make a reasonable margin.

I'm not sure what short-term gain Mr Ford is referring to when he makes reference to "entrepreneurs" and Proseed's perceived value of CP seed, but I suspect that most of those who did secure seed in the tender had a reasonable idea of what it was really worth. Despite Mr Ford's claims that the bulk of this 20 kg of seed has been directed at producing seedlings, I am aware that a significant proportion of it has been topped for the formation of stool beds.

Hopefully Mr Ford's assertion that 20 kg of seed will result in at best 40,000 seedlings is just a typo with a zero being missing. Concerns about control pollinated (CP) seed being sent out of the country are covered by current rules imposed by the *Radiata* Breeding Cooperative and accepted by Proseed which prevent this from occurring.

If the majority of the members of the Association Mr Ford heads missed out on seed in the tender process then it is probably for one or more of the following reasons:

- (i) they miscalculated the value of the seed for seedlings and cuttings programmes of their own;
- (ii) they calculated realistically the value of the seed for seedlings and cuttings programmes of their own but other organisations or nurseries were working with a different set of numbers;
- (iii) they miscalculated what other organisations or nurseries would tender for the seed.

Unfortunately for some under the tender process there was only one shot at securing seed.

Whatever system is to be used to "fairly" allocate elite seed it should reflect the market value of that seed. The current prices nurserymen are happily charging for elite nursery stock supports the view

that the very best seed has been under-priced in the past.

Rob van Rossen

Farm Forestry

Sir,

My apologies for not taking up earlier the points raised by J.J. Hosking in the August issue. He is unduly gloomy about the contribution already made by farm foresters both to the economic forest estate and to its variety.

Their apparently small contribution so far reflects a time when trees were definitely not respectable and there was a strong prejudice against tree planting, in the end expressed legally through rural land-use planning processes. It simply was not done to plant trees on "good agricultural land". In the face of that, farm foresters accomplished a lot in quantity and even more in quality - we now have scattered over the face of the land a huge library of experiments, some successful and others not, but all safe from the bean counter and pointing to many ways forward.

The challenge now is how to turn that to wider advantage.

New Zealand seems to like staggering from one simple orthodoxy to the next. For 40 years after the war we refined farming more and more until it became in the end unthinking, unsightly and uneconomic, though I guess we may credit the sheer mechanistic boredom of much of it for a rise of interest in alternatives such as farm forestry.

The problem for forestry now is that it runs the risk of heading down the same track as pastoral farming. From being something that greens apologised for and politicians made schoolboy jokes about, forestry has suddenly become the light at the end of the tunnel and New Zealand's surfboard into the 20th century, and everyone is trying to climb aboard.

The greater part of the plantation area is locked up in corporate holdings, where there may in future be an interest in silvicultural and species diversity, but there has been little sign of that in the past. Indeed one of the more delightful aspects of returning after an intermittent absence of 10 years is to note the many familiar corporate voices now favouring pruning, thinning, clearwood, genetic improvement and what have you (even Douglas fir sometimes) who 10 years ago, if the subjects were raised, left the room muttering about people not used to the real world.

These people are doing useful things to wood in the mills and the market place,